



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



MONDAY — 3 JAN 2022

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HEADLINE	01/02 Hundreds of schools: delays, closures
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/education/hundreds-of-schools-delayed-or-closed-in-western-washington-monday/281-eb70f7a9-8856-481d-b03a-fca1aa27e9ce
GIST	<p>Hundreds of schools throughout western Washington are either delayed or canceled Monday as students return from winter break.</p> <p>Many of those schools are on two-hour delay citing weather-related reasons. Buses for some are on snow routes.</p> <p>The schedule changes and cancellations come as some areas continue to deal with winter weather and the aftermath of two snowstorms that began after Christmas and continued into last week.</p> <p>There's a chance for a rain-snow mix for portions of the lowlands Monday morning. By Sunday night, easterly winds were keeping temperatures near freezing in the Cascade foothills, according to the National Weather Service.</p> <p>Meanwhile, a Flood Advisory is in effect for the east side of Puget Sound, including areas around Seattle and Everett.</p> <p>A Coastal Flood Advisory is in effect for the coast, as well as portions of Kitsap County and the south Sound area.</p> <p>A High Wind Warning is in effect north of Everett and over in the San Juan Islands.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/03 Covid shuts Tukwila city facilities
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/city-tukwila-facilities-closing-due-covid-19/6UUPWJPW7FGPTAC6OUNAIP5ZSU/
GIST	<p>TUKWILA, Wash. — The city of Tukwila will close most of its facilities this week due to the ongoing spread of COVID-19.</p> <p>The closures include City Hall, the municipal court and the permit center.</p> <p>However, most city services will be available virtually — you can find the city's website here.</p> <p>The Tukwila Community Center will be open on Monday but to enter, proof of vaccination is required.</p>

HEADLINE	01/03 Monday flight cancelations mount
SOURCE	https://www.usatoday.com/story/travel/airline-news/2022/01/01/sunday-canceled-flights-southwest-delta-united-american/9069908002/
GIST	<p>The last day of the year-end holiday travel rush is unfolding like every day since Christmas Eve for airline passengers: chaotic.</p> <p>Airlines canceled nearly 2,700 Sunday flights . across the country and into and out of the United States, according to flight tracker FlightAware. That's on top of more than 2,700 Saturday flight cancellations, bringing the total since Christmas Eve to more than 15,000 canceled flights. This weekend's cancellations marked the worst two-day stretch of the holiday travel season and affected passengers on nearly every U.S. airline.</p> <p>The travel trouble is expected to continue into Monday as an East Coast storm approaches, with nearly 1,500 U.S. flights canceled as of late Sunday, according to FlightAware. Southwest Airlines has canceled nearly 400 Monday flights, or 10% of its scheduled flights, JetBlue 124 flights, or 12% of its flights.</p> <p>Blame the weekend travel mess on wintry weather in key airline hubs including Chicago and Denver, and, at some airlines, continuing flight crew shortages due to a surge in COVID sick calls as omicron spreads. More than 600 of Sunday's flight cancellations were flights to and from Chicago and more than 300 were flights to and from Denver.</p> <p>The airlines with the most Sunday cancellations as of 11 p.m. ET: Southwest,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">► SkyWest Airlines, which operates regional flights for United, Delta, American and Alaska under those airlines' names: 563 flights, or 23% of scheduled flights. Other regional feeder airlines, including Mesa Airlines, Envoy Air and Air Wisconsin, are also canceling dozens of Sunday flights. Mesa, which flies as American Eagle and United Express, has canceled 27% of its flights and Air Wisconsin, which flies as United Express, has canceled 16% of its flights.► Southwest Airlines: 429 flights, or 11%. Southwest suspended operations in Chicago on Saturday afternoon due to a snowstorm and it will take time to get its operation back on track. Flight delays are a big problem for the airline on Sunday, too, with more than 1,800 tardy flights. That is nearly half of scheduled flights and represents one in five of Sunday's overall flight delays in the United States.► Delta Air Lines: 177 flights, or 6%. Delta was one of the first to sound alarms about the impact on staffing from the latest coronavirus wave, with its CEO asking the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to cut the isolation time for those testing positive from 10 days to five days. The CDC changed the recommendations just after Christmas.► JetBlue Airways: 177 flights, or 16%. The New York-based airline announced plans earlier this week to proactively cancel nearly 1,300 flights into mid-January due to staffing issues. The airline warned that the number could grow "until case counts start to come down."► American Airlines: 160 flights, or 5%.► United Airlines: 114 flights, or 5%.
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HEADLINE	01/03 Cases, hospitalizations rise among children
SOURCE	https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/health/2022/01/03/covid-hospitalizations-cases-vaccinations-cdc/9074761002/
GIST	COVID-19 cases among American children are growing at record-high levels.

For the week ending Dec. 23, almost 199,000 child COVID-19 cases were reported, a 50% increase over weekly new cases from the beginning of December, [according to the American Academy of Pediatrics](#).

Children represented 20.8% of all COVID-19 cases during that week, the academy said.

Children are also being hospitalized at record-high rates. During the week of Dec. 22 to Dec. 28, an average of 378 children age 17 and under were admitted per day to hospitals with the coronavirus, a 66% increase from the week before, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported last Thursday.

The previous high over the course of the pandemic was in early September, when child hospitalizations averaged 342 per day, the CDC said.

Two months after vaccinations were approved for 5- to 11-year-olds, only about 14% are fully protected, CDC data shows. The rate is higher for 12- to 17-year-olds, at about 53%.

The Food and Drug Administration is reportedly poised to authorize a third dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine for kids ages 12 to 15.

Regulators also plan to allow adolescents and adults to get the third shots five months after receiving the second dose of the Pfizer's vaccine instead of the current six months, The New York Times reported, citing sources it described as familiar with the agency's deliberations. The Times reported that the authorization is expected Monday.

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HEADLINE	01/02 Act decisively if Russia invades Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/biden-zelensky-ukraine-russia-phone-call/
GIST	<p><i>Wilmington, Delaware</i> — President Joe Biden reiterated his statements that the U.S. and allies will act "decisively" if Russia further invades Ukraine to President Volodymyr Zelensky in a call Sunday, as Russia masses troops along the border between the nations.</p> <p>It's the second call on the subject within a week for Mr. Biden, who spoke with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday.</p> <p>Mr. Biden and President Volodymyr Zelensky's call came as the U.S. and Western allies prepared for a series of diplomatic meetings to try to de-escalate a crisis that Moscow said could rupture ties with Washington.</p> <p>"President Biden made clear that the United States and its allies and partners will respond decisively if Russia further invades Ukraine," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said in a statement following the call.</p> <p>Psaki added that Biden underscored his commitment to the principle of "nothing about you without you," the tenet that it won't negotiate policy that impacts Europe without its allies' input.</p> <p>Biden has spoken of hitting Russia with economy-jarring sanctions if it moves on Ukraine's territory, but he said last month that U.S. military action is not on the table.</p> <p>The Kremlin has demanded that any further expansion of NATO exclude Ukraine and other former Soviet countries.</p> <p>The Russians have also demanded that the military alliance remove offensive weaponry from countries in the region.</p>

"If the obviously aggressive line of our Western colleagues continues, we will take adequate, retaliatory military-technical measures [and] react toughly to unfriendly steps," [Putin told senior military officials](#) during a meeting in remarks carried by Russian state TV last week. "I want to emphasize that we have every right to do so."

The White House has dismissed Russia's demands on NATO as a non-starter. A key principle of the NATO alliance is that membership is open to any qualifying country. And no outsider has membership veto power. While there's little prospect that Ukraine would be invited into the alliance anytime soon, the U.S. and its allies won't rule it out.

Zelensky said in a Twitter posting after Sunday's call that "keeping peace in Europe, preventing further escalation, reforms, deoligarchization were discussed."

"We appreciate the unwavering support," Zelensky said.

Senior U.S. and Russian officials are scheduled to meet January 9-10 in Geneva to discuss the situation. Those talks are to be followed by meetings at the NATO-Russia Council, and at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

Biden spoke with Putin for nearly an hour on Thursday. He told reporters the next day that he warned Putin that his economy would pay a "heavy price" if Russia, which has massed some 100,000 troops near the border, made further moves against Ukraine.

"I'm not going to negotiate here in public, but we made it clear that he cannot — I emphasize cannot — move on Ukraine," Biden said Friday.

Biden said he told Putin it was important for the Russians to take steps before those meetings toward easing the crisis. Putin's foreign affairs adviser, in describing the presidents' conversation this past week, said Biden's pursuit of sanctions "could lead to a complete rupture of relations between our countries and Russia-West relations will be severely damaged."

U.S. intelligence findings indicate Russia has made preparations for a potential invasion in early 2022. But White House officials say it remains unclear whether Putin has already made a decision to move forward with military action.

Still, Biden said he remained hopeful for the upcoming talks. White House officials say they will consult closely with Western allies.

"I always expect if you negotiate you make progress, but we'll see," he said Friday. "We'll see."

Past military incursions by Putin loom large as Mr. Biden weighs his next steps.

In 2014, Russian troops marched into the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea and seized the territory from Ukraine. Russia's annexation of Crimea was one of the darker moments for President Barack Obama on the international stage.

The U.S.-Russia relationship was badly damaged near the end of President George W. Bush's administration after Russia's 2008 invasion of its neighbor Georgia after Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili ordered his troops into the breakaway region of South Ossetia.

Representative Adam Schiff, a California Democrat and chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, said Sunday he feared that Putin was intent on invading Ukraine and "nothing other than a level of sanctions that Russia has never seen will deter him."

	"Russia needs to understand we are united in this," Schiff told "Face the Nation" on CBS. "I also think that a powerful deterrent is the understanding that if they do invade, it is going to bring (NATO) closer to Russia, not push it farther away.
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HEADLINE	01/03 Winter storm moves up East coast
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/winter-weather-storm-system-moving-up-east-coast-years-first-workday/
GIST	<p>A winter storm packing heavy snow was rolling into the District of Columbia, northern Virginia and central Maryland early Monday, bringing up to 10 inches of snow to the area through the afternoon. The system was expected to continue up the East Coast.</p> <p>The National Weather Service issued a winter storm warning for the area until 4 p.m. EST Monday. Wind gusts of up to 35 mph were forecast, and travel was expected to be very difficult because of the hazardous conditions, the weather service said.</p> <p>"The timing of this isn't great," said National Weather Service meteorologist David Roth. "For the D.C. area, it's morning rush hour. At least for places to the Northeast, it'll be closer to midday."</p> <p>The Weather Prediction Center said 2 inches of snow per hour could fall in some areas, and thunder snow was possible. Localized snowfall totals could reach 10 inches.</p> <p>That was adding to delays for air travelers after the holiday weekend, when thousands of U.S. flights were cancelled or delayed due to the one-two punch of bad weather and the COVID-19 surge.</p> <p>The U.S. Office of Personnel Management announced that federal offices in the D.C. area would be closed on Monday. Emergency employees and telework employees would continue to work, the OPM said on its website.</p> <p>The National Weather Service issued a winter storm warning for the area from 1 a.m. to 4 p.m. EST Monday. Wind gusts of up to 35 mph were forecast and travel was expected to be very difficult because of the hazardous conditions, the weather service said.</p> <p>The Weather Prediction Center said 2 inches of snow per hour could fall in some areas, and thunder snow was possible. Localized snowfall totals could reach 10 inches.</p> <p>CBS Radio Washington affiliate WTOP News said the storm could bring the most snow the region has seen in three years. The station also said Maryland and Virginia closed COVID testing and vaccination sites Monday due to the weather.</p> <p>Several school districts in the region said they would be closed, delayed or have virtual learning Monday. D.C. Public Schools said students and staff wouldn't be returning to school until Thursday.</p> <p>Hundreds of school districts in the Mid-Atlantic region canceled or delayed classes for Monday.</p> <p>And some 177,000 homes and businesses in Georgia were without power, according to PowerOutsge.us, along with approximately 103,000 in North Carolina, 96,000 in South Carolina and 40,000 in Tennessee.</p> <p>Snow began falling Sunday night in parts of Alabama, Tennessee and Kentucky. A winter storm warning was also in effect in parts of northern Alabama and southern Tennessee, and portions of Kentucky, North Carolina and West Virginia.</p> <p>Impacts from the winter storm were expected across the South, Appalachian states and into the mid-Atlantic, the weather service said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/29 Human waste impact on Puget Sound
SOURCE	https://crosscut.com/environment/2021/12/what-we-learned-year-about-human-waste-and-puget-sound
GIST	<p>Every year in Puget Sound, 4.5 million people consume salmon, teriyaki, Seattle-style hot dogs and other quintessentially Washington fare, and then urinate, defecate and otherwise create waste that heads to Puget Sound.</p> <p>The ways we handle human waste before it reaches the sound can vary, but what we put into our bodies inevitably ends up there — later today, tomorrow or a century from now. In keeping with the New Year’s adage “out with the old, in with the new,” it’s good to consider: Just because waste is out of our bodies doesn’t mean it isn’t still actively affecting our lives.</p> <p>Here are a few things Crosscut learned about waste in 2021 and its impact on Puget Sound.</p> <p>Most of us don’t spend enough time evaluating urine to become aware of its components, but for inhabitants of Puget Sound, one component — inorganic nitrogen — is a particular cause for concern. When our liver breaks down protein, what’s left is nitrogen, which flushes through our body in urine.</p> <p>While this process helps keep our bodies in balance, too many of us flushing nitrogen into the sound can wreak havoc on the ecosystem. Nitrogen feeds algal blooms, which can not only make people and wildlife sick, but also siphon out dissolved oxygen from the water when the blooms die off, leaving less oxygen for aquatic life to breathe.</p> <p>Sewage treatment facilities are sending less nitrogen into nature than they used to, but the Washington state Department of Ecology is hoping to issue a permit that requires even more of the major nitrogen-contributing facilities to reduce how much they release. This adds to previous concerns pushing the state to improve its waste treatment standards.</p> <p>Most Puget Sound residents rely on sewer systems to flush waste away from their homes, but a number of people rely on septic systems: water treatment facilities on their own property that often involve separating waste and filtering remaining wastewater (effluent) through the soil.</p> <p>Septic systems aren’t built to last forever, and they need maintenance and eventual replacement to keep Puget Sound safe. When that doesn’t happen, evidence often shows up in shellfish that people harvest for food and can get sick from eating. That pollution costs a lot of money to remedy.</p> <p>The state has been tracking how well Puget Sound health districts are doing at inspecting and repairing these systems. According to available data, we’re apparently getting better at septic inspection. But with regional populations expected to increase and many septic systems aging, experts say we will need more resources to avoid a doo-doo to-do.</p> <p>The pandemic isn’t the first time area public health workers have faced opposition to their efforts to keep us safe. Crosscut’s Knute Berger discovered, while reading a mid-20th century history of local public health challenges, that public health officials had trouble getting people on board with more hygienic practices in the wake of the Great Seattle Fire of 1889.</p> <p>For one, people weren’t sold on transitioning their homes from cesspool waste management to sewer hookups. The cesspools not only contributed to disease, but leaked into drinking water sources. The city sanitary inspector had to threaten to put liens on people’s homes to get them to comply.</p> <p>Today, the majority of people appreciate knowing their waste isn’t seeping out of cesspools into streets and water tables, but “sewage spills into Puget Sound demonstrate that even in our second century, there is work still to do,” Berger writes.</p> <p>Toilets are primarily for handling human waste. And yet earlier this year, they played a key role in mitigating an invasive species outbreak in Puget Sound and around the country.</p>

Nonnative zebra mussels and their quagga mussel cousins spread through every U.S. watershed they invade, often by stowing on the hulls of boats. They have reached every watershed in the Lower 48 outside of the [Columbia River Basin](#) in only a few decades. The mussels also have [not been found in Puget Sound](#) so far.

The mussels cause billions of dollars in damage to drinking water, infrastructure and ecosystems, as they blanket lakes, plug pipes and more. So when the state Department of Fish and Wildlife confirmed juvenile zebra mussels had been found on a common aquarium plant sold through a Seattle-area Petco store, employees sprung into action to prevent an invasion.

Fish and Wildlife couldn't easily collect every plant purchased to decontaminate them, so they asked residents to dispose of aquarium water down their toilets — sending it to wastewater treatment plants that would kill any lingering zebra mussels before they could reach Puget Sound.

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HEADLINE	01/02 Seattle public schools mass testing effort
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/seattle-public-schools-begins-mass-testing-effort-for-coronavirus-before-school-resumes/
GIST	<p>On Sunday, Rosa Lopez and her family waited four hours for rapid coronavirus tests.</p> <p>The Lopez children were among about 2,200 people tested Sunday at two Seattle Public Schools clinics for students and staff, according to the district. The mass testing effort will continue at a dozen middle schools around the city on Monday, before school is scheduled to resume Tuesday.</p> <p>At one of the clinics, at South Shore PreK-8, families bundled up in the cold and drizzle as they waited to access rapid antigen tests.</p> <p>The situation was a bit chaotic, Lopez said. Kids were hungry after missing lunch while waiting in line, and despite the large turnout, she didn't see anyone enforce social distancing.</p> <p>Still, Lopez and her sister waited with their children. Some of their family members tested positive over winter break, and they wanted to make sure their children didn't contract the virus.</p> <p>"We try to do our part," said Lopez, whose son is a fifth grader at Concord International Elementary School. "The best thing to teach during the pandemic to the kids is to look after each other and help each other."</p> <p>Seattle Public Schools canceled school Monday to allow for voluntary testing, in response to the spread of the omicron coronavirus variant and concern about potential outbreaks following winter break. The school district identified 139 cases among students and staff during the week leading up to winter break — the highest since the start of school, according to district data.</p> <p>District spokesperson Tim Robinson said Sunday evening that he did not know how many of the test results were positive, but he said the district may share this information in the coming days. Parents were to receive same-day results through text messages.</p> <p>On Monday, testing for students will be available at the following schools, from 1 to 4 p.m. unless noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Denny International Middle School• Eckstein Middle School• Hamilton International Middle School• Jane Addams Middle School• Madison Middle School• McClure Middle School• Meany Middle School

- Mercer International Middle School
- Robert Eagle Staff Middle School
- South Shore PreK-8 School (4-8 p.m.)
- Washington Middle School
- Whitman Middle School

Preschool and elementary school students must be accompanied by an adult. Middle and high school students must bring a [consent form](#) signed by a parent. Results will be provided in 15 minutes.

The district advises that attendees dress in warm clothes, as they may have to wait outside.

For Tiffany Wood, a single working mom, time is scarce. Because she works during the week, she went to Sunday's clinic.

"I felt like it was our duty to get tested even though we didn't have any exposures," Wood said. "But the design of it was horrible. They should have thought it through better."

Her two 5-year-olds, who "don't wait well in lines," were in one for more than three hours. And Wood said having so many people nearby made it feel like a "super-spreader event."

District spokesperson Robinson said attendees were told to observe social distancing, which he said he saw while at the clinic. But it was a big turnout, he said, so it's understandable if parents had concerns.

The [district website](#) says that students who need private or quiet spaces to test will be accommodated.

Students will also be able to get tested at their school during the first week of school, or in the evenings at South Shore PreK-8. Meany Middle School will also start offering tests in the evenings starting Wednesday.

If students test positive, they should stay home for at least 10 days, [according to the district](#).

Last month, the school district told parents to be "as ready as possible" for the potential of a temporary shift online. It's up to individual districts to decide whether to close schools or shift to remote instruction based on outbreaks.

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HEADLINE	01/02 Police pinpoint starting point Colorado fire
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/police-pinpoint-starting-point-of-historic-colorado-wildfire/
GIST	<p>Investigators located the ignition point of the devastating Boulder County, Colorado, wildfire that engulfed more than 1,000 buildings in drought-parched grasslands at the base of the Rocky Mountains, and the governor of the state underscored heightened risks posed by climate change.</p> <p>"It's really obvious where that fire started and what direction it went," Boulder County Sheriff Joe Pelle said at a news conference Sunday. The location is near the intersection of a state highway where a wooden shed was photographed ablaze Thursday, Pelle said, noting his office executed a search warrant but "it is an open and active investigation."</p> <p>The 6,215-acre wind-whipped blaze that destroyed 991 buildings, damaged more than 100 others and left two people missing and presumed dead. A third person reported missing was located alive, Pelle said. Investigators initially suspected downed power lines caused the blaze, however, Xcel Energy Inc. — the electric provider in the area — found no evidence.</p> <p>Burned-out residents face a long haul toward rebuilding given "shortages of supplies and labor," Governor Jared Polis said. Deanne Criswell, administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, toured the fire zone Sunday, anticipating "a long road to recovery."</p>

	<p>Boulder County’s disaster is the latest triggered by extreme weather as climate change and a La Nina weather pattern leave much of the West in drought. “This was a horrific convergence of two things,” Polis said. “We had an unusually dry and warm winter” and “historic wind gusts.”</p> <p>Relief arrived in the aftermath of the inferno in the form of a foot of snow, which aided firefighters.</p> <p>“We know that with the climate we face higher risks,” the governor said. “It’s a challenging issue across the American West.”</p> <p>The wildfire mitigation plan for the area, 30 miles (48 kilometers) northwest of Denver, hadn’t been updated since 2010, predating a 17% increase in the local population, the Denver Gazette reported Sunday. The communities of Louisville and Superior suffered the greatest losses and Louisville police deployed cadaver dogs as a precaution although there were no reports of missing people in the burned out city.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/02 Seattle ‘pendulum’ relationship w/Bellevue
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/pacific-nw-magazine/the-history-and-destiny-of-seattles-relationship-with-bellevue-is-marked-by-connection-and-competition/
GIST	<p>THIS PAST OCTOBER, the tech industry news website GeekWire published a story headlined: “Bellevue’s boom: City’s tech industry is poised to eat Seattle’s lunch.”</p> <p>It said technology companies were driving an unprecedented boom in the suburb 12 miles from downtown Seattle.</p> <p>For example, Amazon plans to hire 25,000 employees there, the same amount as at HQ2 in northern Virginia. Salesforce, eBay and Facebook are also onboard Bellevue. Microsoft’s growing campus is in nearby Redmond.</p> <p>“And what’s driving the boom?” GeekWire asked. “Tech execs say it’s Bellevue’s low crime rate, business-friendly politics, tent-free sidewalks and vibrant downtown.”</p> <p>Indeed, the long rivalry between Bellevue and Seattle is back again. Their history and destinies are entwined yet also diverging, not least because of Seattle’s self-inflicted wounds.</p> <p>Such competition seemed far-fetched a century ago. Bellevue was given a post office in 1886, when the future Eastside was isolated on a branch railroad, mostly tied to logging. The town didn’t incorporate until 1953, with 5,950 residents. Seattle’s population then was around 500,000, and downtown was the Northwest’s unrivaled shopping and business hub. It also was becoming Jet City, thanks to Boeing’s breakthrough with jet airliners.</p> <p>But Bellevue Square shopping center, the brainchild of Kemper Freeman Sr., already had been open for seven years. This was a sign of things to come, especially as floating bridges connected to Seattle, and Eastside sprawl expanded with new single-family homes, good schools and office parks.</p> <p>By 1970, Bellevue held more than 61,000 people, helped by white flight from Seattle’s mandatory school desegregation.</p> <p>Seattle lost 5% of its population in the 1960s and 7% the following decade. At the same time, King County grew by 28% and 24%, respectively. The Eastside scored big with Microsoft’s headquarters in 1986. By the turn of the 21st century, the metropolitan area encompassed Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue.</p> <p>Kemper Freeman Jr. vastly expanded Bellevue Square in the 1990s and 2000s to accommodate more than 200 stores, including Nordstrom and Macy’s, and developed the surrounding land.</p>

Fast-forward to 2020, and Seattle's population had been growing at one of the fastest rates in the nation during the previous decade, reaching more than 737,000. Bellevue's reached nearly 152,000, making it the fifth-most-populous city in the state. But the suburb and the Eastside were losing favor to Seattle in the 2010s, especially with Amazon's transformation of South Lake Union.

It was a pendulum that is still swinging.

The stakes are serious, especially for Seattle. Although the exodus from cities predicted early in the pandemic never happened, urban scholar Richard Florida sees the end of office-heavy central business districts as remote work continues. Meanwhile, coworking spaces are wagering on the suburbs.

IN 1991, JOEL GARREAU wrote the influential book "Edge City: Life on the New Frontier."

He described a new urban form distinguished by car-based suburbs with at least 5 million square feet of office space, at least 600,000 square feet of leasable retail space, home to more jobs than bedrooms and not considered a city as recently as 30 years ago. Also, the population there must consider it one place.

"Edge Cities represent the third wave of our lives, pushing into new frontiers in this half century," he wrote. "First, we moved our homes out past the traditional idea of what constituted a city. This was the suburbanization of America, especially after World War II. Then we wearied of returning downtown for the necessities of life, so we moved our marketplaces out to where we lived. This was the malling of America, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. Today, we have moved our means of creating wealth, the essence of urbanism — our jobs — out to where most of us have lived and shopped for two generations. That has led to the rise of Edge City."

An Edge City often has its roots in a shopping center, is near freeways and is usually car-dependent. Some famous Edge Cities are Century City in Los Angeles and Tysons Corner, Virginia. But he easily could be describing Bellevue.

Kemper Freeman Jr., Bellevue's unofficial first citizen and powerful leader, not only expanded shopping and entertainment centers but also began building high-rises to house corporate offices.

Freeman also wielded his political power to undercut regional transit efforts. "Roads over transit" was his slogan in helping defeat a \$6.7 billion plan for light rail, regional bus service and commuter rail in 1995. (A \$3.9 billion plan was approved in 1996 — unlike the previous initiative, it didn't serve Bellevue).

Garreau's book coincided with the nadir of many American downtowns, and for many represented their epitaph.

Unlike many places, Seattle never gave up on its downtown. Such assets as Pike Place Market and the Space Needle remain world-famous destinations.

Every body blow, such as the loss of locally owned big banks, was countered with reinvention. One of the most successful came after the city's premier department store, Frederick & Nelson, closed in 1992. But the building was saved and turned into the flagship store of Nordstrom, which had grown far beyond its roots as a shoe store, in 1998. Pacific Place, an urban mall, opened around the same time. The Bon Marché, by then Macy's, also stayed downtown.

Benaroya Hall was built downtown in 1998 at the insistence of Seattle Symphony maestro Gerard Schwarz. The edgy Rem Koolhaas-designed Seattle Central Library opened in 2004.

Also, Seattle kept most of its big-league sports teams, eventually playing in sparkling new stadiums and arenas near downtown. All have the city name rather than something like "Puget Sound" — every Phoenix team except the NBA Suns took the name "Arizona" to appease powerful suburbs. (To be sure, Seattle's pride and sports scene were wounded when the NBA's Sonics were sold in 2006 to Oklahoma buyers who moved the team to Oklahoma City in 2008.)

The 1980s and 1990s also saw a flowering of youth culture in Seattle, especially grunge music, with such bands as Green River, Mudhoney, Pearl Jam, Soundgarden and Nirvana playing at clubs and the Moore Theatre. The Sub Pop record label was founded.

Still, Bellevue was enjoying better performance than downtown Seattle in new offices, as well as retail. Bellevue became home to the headquarters of T-Mobile, Paccar, Expedia, Eddie Bauer and many regional offices. Downtown Bellevue held the second-largest employment center in the state. The premier Edge City of the Northwest seemed unstoppable.

BUT A FUNNY THING happened on the way to the triumph of Edge Cities. It was the “back to the city movement,” which had been percolating for years but bloomed in the 2010s.

Millennials and many empty-nest baby boomers preferred the energy, authenticity and options of cities with good bones and strong downtowns. They didn’t want to be car-burdened. Many companies seeking top talent followed them.

In 2016, McDonald’s moved its headquarters from the suburbs to downtown Chicago, joining a list of other companies (Boeing moved to a fashionable skyscraper there from Seattle in 2001). General Electric shifted from its Fairfield, Connecticut, campus to downtown Boston.

“We are going through a change in our work force, and we wanted to be where we could attract millennials,” Mark Vergnano, chief executive of chemical giant Chemours, told The New York Times.

“This is a group that likes to be in an urban setting, with access to public transportation. They don’t want to be confined to a building with a cafeteria or be next door to a shopping center.”

Seattle, with a lively downtown, inviting urban neighborhoods and a growing light-rail line, was ideally positioned to profit from the sea change.

The two biggest individual drivers were Paul Allen and Jeff Bezos.

Allen, the Microsoft co-founder, operated Vulcan Real Estate, which restored Seattle’s Union Station and built new offices nearby. He bought up land in neglected South Lake Union with plans to remake it into a dense office and innovation district. When voters rejected his idea of a park, Seattle Commons, as the neighborhood’s centerpiece, Allen went ahead developing all of it.

Bezos moved the headquarters of Amazon from the old Pacific Medical Center on Beacon Hill to South Lake Union and the Denny Triangle. And the company took off, moving beyond e-commerce to cloud computing, entertainment and other tech areas. By the end of the 2010s, Amazon had 50,000 employees in South Lake Union, including in three skyscrapers and the signature Spheres.

The district also attracted other technology companies, including Apple, Facebook and Google, along with medical research and biotech operations. It is close to the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center and Seattle Cancer Care Alliance, all served by the streetcar.

Car-dependent office parks were out of fashion. Expedia abandoned Bellevue for a waterfront campus in Seattle, followed by Weyerhaeuser moving from Federal Way to Pioneer Square. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation placed its futuristic headquarters across the street from Seattle Center.

Although rents rose in the city, it was still more affordable than the Bay Area, while offering the amenities sought by top talent. Hence, Seattle became a Big Tech destination, a major startup scene, construction-crane capital of the nation, one of America’s so-called Superstar Cities.

BUT TROUBLE WAS roiling the Superstar even before the pandemic.

Seattle's longtime pragmatic liberalism on the city council was replaced by a far-left majority, most focused on social justice issues and hostile to business, especially Amazon. This caused Amazon to find a "full equal" second headquarters in a more "business-friendly" locale. HQ2 went to northern Virginia near Washington, D.C. But Bellevue also benefited from Amazon's expansion, aided by Seattle's payroll tax on 800 "big businesses," which put the city at a competitive disadvantage.

As GeekWire reported, "Longtime Bellevue council member Conrad Lee said he doesn't understand the Seattle City Council's apparent indifference, if not hostility, to Amazon and other tech employers. 'I think they are foolish,' he said. 'They are driving away jobs. They are hurting the economy.' "

Downtown Seattle's retail sector began to swoon in the late 2010s, partly propelled by the city's relaxed attitude toward shoplifting. Macy's, which lost a million dollars in one year from shoplifting, closed its landmark downtown store in February 2020. Shoplifters sometimes attacked store employees or operated in organized groups.

When the pandemic hit in the spring of that year, offices emptied out, restaurants closed, the cruise season was canceled and hotel occupancy dropped to single digits.

Meanwhile, despite hundreds of millions of dollars spent to address Seattle's homelessness crisis, the problem grew worse. Tents crowded streets and parks. Derelict RVs and cars appeared in front of residences.

With the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer, Seattle saw an eruption of mostly peaceful protests. But these were marred by looting and the city's surrender of a portion of Capitol Hill for a short period of time, resulting in a condition that verged on lawlessness. Mayor Jenny Durkan said it could be "a summer of love." It was anything but.

Even as crime rose, the council moved to cut police funding, prompting the resignation of Chief Carmen Best in 2020. This past fall, further cuts were proposed even as interim Chief Adrian Diaz warned they would eliminate 101 officers from a department that already had lost 325 officers to previous cutbacks, resignations and retirements.

BELLEVUE SAW LIMITED protests, including looting of Bellevue Square, but approached the challenges very differently.

Bellevue Police respond to "quality of life" calls that SPD won't or can't. Shoplifters are arrested and prosecuted. Tents get immediate attention. Unsheltered people are offered services, then encouraged to move along.

It's reflective of a fairly homogenous and affluent suburb. Sure, Bellevue is "diverse," but only ethnically. Not in class. Its median household income at \$120,000 compares with \$92,263 in Seattle (both well above the national average). Households are "increasingly married, home-owning and educated — traditionally a perfect recipe for white-collar hiring," GeekWire reported.

And unlike Seattle, Bellevue aggressively seeks to attract and retain business.

While Seattle's core lost a net 230 street-level businesses, especially retailers, Bellevue Square is open with more than 200 stores.

Still, Bellevue is changing.

Although its downtown is marked by wide streets, sidewalks that suddenly end, and a strange mix of older shopping strips and glittering high-rises, it's becoming denser and more urban. This is especially happening in the multibillion-dollar Bel-Red corridor across the freeway, focused on transit-oriented, mixed-use development linking Redmond. Major players are Wright Runstad and Vulcan.

Return to Top	<p>It's become more Democratic, too. Kemper Freeman is 80 years old. And the light rail that he fought so long is already being tested in Bellevue and is scheduled to open to Seattle in 2023.</p> <p>Betting against Seattle is risky. Recently, the pendulum seems to have swung somewhat from the far-left to the center-left. The November election saw centrist Bruce Harrell triumph as mayor, while Ann Davison, running on a law-and-order platform, won as city attorney.</p> <p>Meanwhile, tourism has returned, while hotel occupancy has rebounded. Downtown office-space occupancy rose in the second quarter of 2021. Although development slowed because of the pandemic, 46 projects were completed or under construction downtown, with an additional 24 in the pipeline this year. Among the new skyscrapers is the shimmering Rainier Square Tower.</p> <p>Bellevue, however, doesn't need to be a Superstar big city to continue its success. In an ideal world, it and the Eastside complement Seattle. In the real world, they are competitors, too.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/02 Utilities spark wildfires: in WA who's liable?
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/times-watchdog/when-power-lines-cause-wildfires-washington-state-doesnt-hold-utilities-accountable/
GIST	<p>GRAHAM, Pierce County — Darrell Herde lived on 244th Street for nearly 30 years, never considering the risk of wildfire. Not until the knock on his door when, still bleary-eyed with sleep, he opened it to see a firefighter and smoke.</p> <p>Baseball-sized embers fell as the 40-foot trees above ignited, blackened and cracked from the heat. His home had already begun to burn.</p> <p>In slippered feet, Herde, 72, briefly sprayed his mobile home with a garden hose against the furnace-like winds before fleeing in his Toyota Corolla.</p> <p>Labor Day 2020, five houses were destroyed in rural Graham, under the shadow of Mount Rainier. The Red Cross gave each resident a bucket and shovel to sift through remains, but for Herde, there was little to salvage.</p> <p>The fire flattened his trailer, hollowed out his garage, made ash of fishing poles and power tools, sucked honey from Mason jars, and gutted the 1967 Impala he had recently restored. Fire twisted the car's windshield into a cylindrical spike, like an unnatural icicle.</p> <p>For nearly two months after the fire, Puget Sound Energy — whose power line sparked the first flames after a tree fell against it in a windstorm — continued to charge Herde for electricity to a home that no longer existed, yet did not restore power to the borrowed camping trailer he parked on his decimated property.</p> <p>Puget Sound Energy has not otherwise been held responsible for the damage the 244th Command fire caused to Herde and his neighbors. And under Washington law, it is unlikely to be.</p> <p>The state's law and regulations are mostly silent about utility companies' duty to prevent wildfire. Its regulators aren't required to inspect power lines for fire risk, and have no power to impose fines if there are hazards. Utility companies don't even have to report fires caused by their lines unless they cause serious injury or death.</p> <p>Those gaps leave Washington homeowners with a stark reality: When power line fires burn down homes, residents often have little recourse.</p>

Despite decades of damage caused by crackling hot power lines strung across the drought-stricken West Coast, and evidence that climate change will only bring worse wreckage, Washington lags behind California and Oregon in holding electric utilities accountable for fire.

The Washington Public Utilities and Transportation Commission says its oversight is focused on the economics of the state's three investor-owned electric companies, and experts say the regulator is overmatched by the heft of the utilities.

Yet electrical infrastructure poses clear safety risks, causing more than 400 fires on state-owned land in the past five years alone, according to data kept by the Washington state Department of Natural Resources, although the state does not keep comprehensive wildfire statistics, and well over a thousand fires will never be assigned a cause.

In 2020, the acreage burned due to human-caused wildfire — the category that includes power line ignitions — was second only to California, according to data kept by the National Interagency Fire Center.

Washington has made recent commitments to address forest management and beef up firefighting resources, including passing a \$125 million biannual forest health bill, but state lawmakers have dragged their feet when it comes to considering how utilities factor into the equation.

For the first time in June, the commission asked state utilities to submit plans for wildfire prevention and response, including how each company handles vegetation and whether it had plans to shut off power under extreme conditions.

Herde, retired and without insurance, spent a year living in a 174 square-foot camping trailer beneath brittle black trees, relying on a dorm-sized refrigerator that had a tendency to freeze his breakfast eggs and attract ants.

"I never assumed in my wildest life that the place would ever burn," he said.

"You would think the way things happen in California, you'd think the power companies would learn from somebody else," said Herde, referring to the power line-sparked Camp Fire that killed 86 people outside Sacramento in 2018. "My feeling is they didn't give a rat's ass what happened."

California and Oregon, facing similar wildfire risk, have guidelines and requirements for companies to cut power in emergency situations, when conditions like high winds and drought escalate the risk of catastrophic fires, and they have stronger reporting requirements.

But neither Puget Sound Energy, the dominant privately owned utility in Western Washington, nor Avista, its counterpart in Eastern Washington, have plans to shut off power during extreme events — and the state utilities commission doesn't require them to. PacifiCorp does have plans to shut off power, because in addition to the Yakima Valley and southeast Washington, it also operates in Oregon and California.

Shutting off power leads to other complexities and liabilities, including limiting critical access to air conditioning in extreme heat or medically necessary equipment during outages. But failure to do so also has devastating consequences, and it is increasingly becoming the industry standard.

When fire comes for your home, other forms of aid are hard to access. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has consistently refused to provide individual assistance to Washington residents displaced by the state's most destructive fires since 2014.

And insurance policies are increasingly costly and difficult to obtain in Washington's fire-prone regions, especially for older and manufactured, lower-income homes.

Some attorneys say the lack of state regulation can make lawsuits more challenging to bring against utility companies for smaller communities like Graham. How do you prove negligence if there is no law for a company to break?

“To be very frank, the moral of the story in the current state of Washington state law is don’t live next to power lines,” said Neil Stubbs, a personal injury lawyer in Tacoma. “The company might be able to burn down your house and get away with it.”

Known risk

Utilities are far from the only cause of wildfires, but the damage that can ensue when electrical lines ignite is undeniable, and the state has known the danger for decades.

It hadn’t rained in over a month when winds more than 50 mph gusted through Spokane in mid-October 1991. Dozens of fires, later dubbed Firestorm, destroyed more than 110 homes and resulted in the death of a six-months-pregnant woman outside her car. Inland Power & Light and Washington Water Power, which is now Avista, paid about \$11.3 million to victims as a result of the harm caused by their power lines.

More than a decade later, in August 2005, 100 homes were destroyed in the Blue Mountains when a Columbia Rural Electric Association line sparked against a deadened tree and burned 52,000 acres.

The state’s regulatory landscape is complicated by numerous types of power companies, including dozens of regional nonprofit public utility districts, overseen by elected commissioners, and city utilities like Seattle City Light. This leaves latitude for how each utility behaves.

The Department of Natural Resources has the power to investigate wildfires on state land or those that use state resources, but do so only in order to collect the costs to Washington of fighting the fire when there is a negligent party.

However, power and money is concentrated in the state’s three investor-owned utilities: Avista, Puget Sound Energy and PacifiCorp, which are overseen by federal standards and the state’s UTC.

The UTC, with a staff of about 150 and a \$66 million budget, oversees electrical utilities, natural gas, water, pipelines, low-level nuclear waste disposal and telecommunication. Investor-owned utilities, however, can see annual revenues in the billions; Puget Sound Energy’s most recent net income was \$274 million, and Avista’s was \$129 million.

PacifiCorp had net income of \$1.5 billion in 2019 and 2020, but spent just \$1.58 million in 2019 and was forecast to spend \$22.6 million in 2020 preventing wildfire risk, according to financial statements from Berkshire Hathaway Energy, PacifiCorp’s owner.

The three-member UTC is focused on the cost and reliability of electricity. Annually, each company self-reports how it manages vegetation that could impact electrical operations, including the amount of brush and trees removed. Some companies report the age of their poles or lines regularly as well, according to a commission spokesperson.

But accidents only need to be reported if they result in injury or death, and the UTC does not independently inspect safety compliance or fine companies for missed inspections or potential wildfire dangers. As a result, implementation and inspection is left to each company and to federal oversight.

The UTC says it relies on federal regulators to conduct safety inspections. But since 2008, only a handful of federal fines were issued against Washington’s investor-owned utilities — less than \$650,000 against Avista and Puget Sound Energy combined, and \$4.3 million against PacifiCorp (it also faced a \$42 million penalty for a 2012 wildfire that killed one person in Utah).

No violations have been issued by the North American Electric Reliability Commission for violations in Washington since 2014, the year wildfires began to escalate in the state.

“The utility always has more, richer, deeper information than the commission and its staff does,” said Philip Jones, a former Washington UTC commissioner of 12 years. That makes it easier for companies to “pick and choose” how information is presented, he said, and potentially bury problems the commission may not be attuned to.

The UTC is consistently underfunded, he said — primarily reliant on regulatory fees, federal grants and penalties — and lacks the technical expertise to rigorously oversee electric utilities on nuanced issues. And without enforcement power, he said, the commission has little motivation to turn its focus to safety investigations.

“I could see some people say, ‘Why should we investigate it if we can’t do anything at the back end, if we don’t have penalty authority?’ ” Jones said.

“Parties are so entrenched in their way of doing business it is difficult to get reform,” he added. “Sometimes it takes a major crisis to move not just the commission, but the utility, the Legislature, the governor, to recognize that we have to do things differently.”

Indeed, a serious gasoline pipeline accident in Bellingham in 1999, causing the deaths of a teenager and two children, prompted UTC to take over inspection authority of pipelines from the federal government, an approach that is now considered among the most aggressive in the nation.

“Currently, there are no state rules or laws for utilities to violate related to wildfire or vegetation management,” said Emilie Brown, a UTC spokesperson.

“The commission may decide to take further action in the future,” she said.

At a commission hearing in May, commission Chairman David Danner said he was aware that “in other states their commissioners are actually developing rules — doing a little more what I would call ... maybe this is wrong, to call it micromanagement.”

“Their involvement is certainly getting more significant, so we will be having conversations about what our role should be.”

Danner declined an interview with The Seattle Times but said in an email in December that Washington’s wildfire utility planning “isn’t really that much different than that in other Western states.”

Avista, Puget Sound Energy and PacifiCorp all said they have ongoing and evolving fire management plans and have increased how they invest in and deal with risks like vegetation, as well as identifying high-fire regions, calling safety a top priority.

A spokesperson for Avista said the company manually patrols electrical outages before restoring power during the fire season, and has begun using new tools for real-time identification of high-risk vegetation and trees. Puget Sound Energy also says it expanded inspection and removal of trees since the 2020 fire season, while PacifiCorp now has a full-time meteorology department.

“We proactively plan across our system to mitigate wildfire risk, even in the absence of regulation,” said Drew Hanson, a spokesperson for PacifiCorp.

But even in 2014, the West Coast was facing decades of inadequate forestry management that, coupled with increasing drought and heat, left it perilously vulnerable to even the smallest spark. Gov. Jay Inslee warned of the state’s need to address an impending “fire apocalypse.”

More than 386,000 acres burned in wildfires that year, with residents accusing the Department of Natural Resources, which manages state forestlands, of failing to act quickly enough to prevent harm.

The next year only eclipsed records, as the Okanogan fire complex became the largest in state history, a collection of catastrophic ignitions that caused thousands of people to evacuate. Among them was the Twisp River fire, which state investigators attributed to tree branches hitting an Okanogan County Electric Cooperative distribution line.

In the chaos of the fire, with resources already strained statewide, three firefighters died when their vehicle crashed amid blinding smoke. Smoke clouded the air as ambulances carried the bodies to the funeral home the next day.

The fire seasons helped lead the state to establish a Wildland Fire Advisory Committee and develop a 20-year strategic plan for forest health. But it made little mention of the problems posed by electrical infrastructure or the need for greater state oversight.

“We have been burning down half of towns for 10 years, but it is just Okanogan County and nobody cares,” said state Rep. Joel Kretz, R-Wauconda. “I have seen it happen and seen the decades it takes to recover — people living in travel trailers, they don’t have insurance, they don’t have the means.”

“In those days it was, ‘Oh, it’s just an Eastern Washington problem,’ ” he said, but, “This is a crisis and everybody is affected if we don’t do something different.”

California sea change

Three years ago, on a tinder-dry November morning in California, worn-out equipment on a Pacific Gas and Electric line sparked a fire that, within hours, became the most destructive in the state’s history. Meteorology reports had warned of high wind conditions, but the company kept its power lines hot, even though it had a plan to shut off power in extreme circumstances.

The Camp fire, and the fallout that would ensue for PG&E — including filing for bankruptcy as a result of fines, liability and legal costs that the company said exceeded \$30 billion — sent ripples through the utility community, and prompted new regulations in California and Oregon.

Meanwhile, in 2019, Washington’s Legislature set up a task force to discuss problems. It later became a permanent advisory committee, but its recommendations and agreements — including developing a standard for managing dangerous trees and improving communication between utilities and the state — have yet to be signed or implemented two years later.

“What is driving us is liability. If we did cause a fire by not doing something we are liable,” said Jim Smith, manager of the Klickitat Public Utility District, who sits on the committee. “Most of this legislation is 20 years old or 30 years old when fires were not the problem they are today.”

On Labor Day weekend 2020 alone, power lines caused at least 44 fires in Washington, burning more than 147,000 acres, including the 244th Command fire, the Whitney fire, which destroyed 127,430 acres, and the Babb Road fire in Eastern Washington that rapidly flattened 228 structures in the towns of Malden and Pine City to ash.

Avista spokesperson Annie Gannon said the fires that weekend were particularly complex and challenging because they were “not in the highest risk areas.”

Still, the UTC and the Legislature did not respond aggressively. Instead, the UTC convened a series of informal public meetings and required companies to submit plans explaining how the utility companies prepare for wildfire risk, but without creating any formal standard for companies to abide by.

The commission did review Avista’s wildfire spending plan for the first time this year, after an investigation by the Department of Natural Resources found the company’s power line caused the fire that destroyed 80 percent of Malden.

Following two serious fires in 2018 and 2020, Avista said in its recent wildfire resiliency plan that it intends to spend up to \$38 million per year by 2023 on wildfire mitigation in Washington and Idaho. The UTC has yet to review wildfire spending for the other investor-based utilities in the state.

Brown, the UTC spokesperson, said more requirements may be implemented by the commission as part of legislation passed in April, but exactly what these rules will be and whether they will address wildfire risk has yet to be established.

In contrast, the Oregon Public Utility Commission took swift action in response to the damage caused by the Labor Day fires there, where more than a million acres burned and nine people died. The weekend set into motion rule-making for utilities, requiring them to develop plans before the 2021 fire season for risk-based wildfire mitigation, fire reporting and public safety shut-off protocols.

There is nothing in Washington's administrative code addressing utility wildfire prevention experts and lawmakers said.

"We are late to addressing it," said state Sen. Christine Rolfes, D-Bainbridge Island.

"The utility oversight was just a failure of imagination, and it wasn't until the disasters in California that people started saying, 'Huh, this could happen here,' " she said. "The fires in 2020 illustrated that we hadn't done that work soon enough."

Trespass by fire

Fire is not only an act of God, but one — attorneys have argued and courts have established — equally corrupted by man. As a result, in the absence of state oversight, the main recourse left to residents who lose their homes is the legal system.

Courts have long held that the operation of electric utilities — transmitting hundreds of thousands of exceptionally hot volts of power through thin, vulnerable rods above communities and wilderness — is an implicitly dangerous act.

"Utilities must 'exercise a very high degree of care and prudence because of the dangers which lurk in electricity,' " the Oregon Supreme Court determined in 1932.

This principle is embedded in California's constitution, dating to 1879, under the doctrine of inverse condemnation. It says the public is entitled to fair compensation when a public use entity, like a utility, damages someone's property, regardless of fault.

"If PG&E did not have to pay for the wildfire they would have no impetus to clean up their act," said Mike Danko, a California trial lawyer who represented victims of a PG&E gas explosion and power line wildfire. "The only way to control their conduct is not through regulation, it is by taking the profit out of wrongdoing."

In Washington, no such law exists. Not only does the state's commission have less enforcement muscle than California, legal remedies are more limited, Danko said.

"There is never a guarantee of power [companies] exercising their discretion to make things safer," he said. "The recourse is political or public retribution."

Matthew Preusch, an attorney involved in a \$600 million wildfire litigation against PacifiCorp in Oregon, said the lack of Washington state rules requiring power shut-off plans in extreme weather is striking, and could be grounds for arguing Avista was negligent in the Malden fire. His firm is investigating such a lawsuit.

"How many cities have to be wiped off the map before a utility acknowledges that utility-caused wildfires are a risk they have to plan for?" he asked.

Still, some attorneys say establishing negligence is easier to prove when a state has clear standards in place. Conversely, some public utility districts argue the lack of state standards is exactly what leaves them unintentionally vulnerable to liability.

“The devastating effect of these fires has proven to be so severe in other states you look at it and say, ‘If this were to happen here, and we hadn’t done anything, we wouldn’t feel very good,’ ” said Steve Wright, general managers of the Chelan County Public Utility District, an area with 52,000 customers and one of the highest fire risks in Washington, on the dry, eastern side of the mountains.

Shutting off power is complex, requiring public warnings and considerations for medically sensitive individuals, but Wright’s PUD implemented a shut-off plan on its own.

Several Washington lawmakers say some investor-based utilities oppose more regulatory scrutiny but in private meetings have instead sought to gain liability protection under state law.

“It has come up in a couple of conversations,” said Rep. Larry Springer, D-Kirkland. “I would expect utilities are going to look for some level of liability protection ... but where that line is will be a very fine balancing act.”

Insulating utilities from liability, however, could make lawsuits involving small fires like Graham’s economically unrealistic, said Stubbs, whose firm considered but didn’t file a lawsuit against Puget Sound Energy for the 2020 fire.

“You are dealing with the David-and-Goliath issue,” he said. “You have an immeasurably powerful company battling citizens.”

“Now I never look”

Past roadside fruit stands, a large Christian church adorned with a 20-foot white cross, and low, winding foothills, much of 244th Street appears ravaged by time and neglect though the fire that burned occurred just over a year ago.

With the help of a neighbor, Herde applied for local assistance from Pierce County and bought a new manufactured home in time for this winter. But the fire left many with a bitter taste.

Randy Johnson saw the moment of the first spark, when a tremendous gust of wind knocked a tree sideways into the power line behind his house. His wife, Kim, was the first to call 911 and recalled fleeing through their neighbors’ backyard, the dirt road already enveloped with towering flames. She remembers the sound of an explosion she thought was their house, but turned out to be her daughter’s Mazda, full of her belongings, in the garage.

She remembers how the skin of her neighbor’s horses charred in the heat. The agony of a neighbor whose mother’s ashes burned alongside other possessions. How the fire trucks arrived without water.

Kim stopped leaving the house, too depressed by the barren landscape outside her front door. Puget Sound Energy declined to replace the burn-scarred utility pole outside her back gate, saying it didn’t pose a safety hazard. But Johnson saw it as kindling for the next fire.

“This used to be full of trees. We had shade,” she said. “Now I never look. It’s too sad.”

By late fall, they’d put up a “For Sale” sign outside their metal front gate near a massive American flag and moved to the Midwest.

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SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/border-security/cbp-expands-simplified-arrival-to-four-ports-of-entry-in-washington-state/
GIST	<p>U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) expanded the use of biometric facial comparison technology Dec. 15 to the border crossings at the ports of Laurier, Metaline Falls, Ferry, Boundary, and Frontier as part of CBP's land border innovation efforts.</p> <p>"I am pleased to announce the implementation of biometric facial comparison technology at these four additional border crossings," said Seattle Director of Field Operations Brian Humphrey. "This cutting-edge technology is proving to be effective at intercepting impostors and helps streamline the arrival process for travelers."</p> <p>Simplified Arrival is an enhanced international arrival process that uses facial biometrics to automate the manual document checks that are already required for admission into the United States. This process provides travelers with a secure, touch less travel experience while fulfilling a longstanding Congressional mandate to verify the entry and exit of non-U.S. citizens.</p> <p>The biometric facial comparison process occurs only at a time and place where travelers are already required by law to verify their identity by presenting a travel document. When a traveler arrives at one of the pedestrian lanes or undergoes I-94 processing, he or she will pause for a photo at the primary inspection point. A CBP officer will review and query the travel document, which will retrieve the traveler's passport or visa photo from government holdings and compare it to the new photo.</p> <p>This enhanced process using facial biometrics only takes a few seconds and is more than 98 percent accurate. In addition, foreign travelers who have traveled to the United States previously may no longer need to provide fingerprints, as their identity will be confirmed through the touch less facial biometric process.</p> <p>CBP is committed to its privacy obligations and has taken steps to safeguard the privacy of all travelers. CBP has employed strong technical security safeguards and has limited the amount of personally identifiable information used in the facial biometric process. New photo comparisons of U.S. citizens will be deleted within 12 hours. Photo comparisons of most foreign nationals will be stored in a secure U.S. Department of Homeland Security system.</p> <p>U.S. travelers and foreign nationals who are not required to provide biometrics and wish to opt out of the new biometric process may notify a CBP officer as they approach the primary inspection point. These travelers will be required to present a valid travel document for inspection by a CBP officer and will be processed consistent with long established processes for admission into the United States.</p> <p>Simplified Arrival pairs one of the industry's highest ranked facial comparison algorithms (as assessed by the National Institute of Standards and Technology) with trained CBP officers who are skilled at verifying the authenticity of travel documents. If a traveler cannot be matched to a photo on record using the Simplified Arrival process, the traveler will proceed through the traditional inspection process consistent with existing requirements for admission into the United States.</p> <p>To date, more than 119 million travelers have participated in the biometric facial comparison process at air, land, and seaports of entry. Since September 2018, CBP has leveraged facial biometrics to prevent more than 1,100 impostors using genuine travel documents from illegally entering the United States at air and land ports of entry.</p> <p>More information about CBP's efforts to secure and streamline travel through facial biometrics can be found here.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/02 Sudan reinstated prime minister resigns
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/02/world/africa/abdalla-hamdok-resigns-sudan.html

NAIROBI, Kenya — Sudan's prime minister, who was ousted in a military coup but reinstated over a month ago, resigned on Sunday, in the latest upheaval to disrupt the country's shaky transition to democracy from dictatorship.

The decision by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok came as widespread protests gripped the northeast African nation.

Protesters denounced not just the coup that unseated Mr. Hamdok in October but also the deal that returned him to power in November. Opposition political groups and other major political forces rejected it as an unacceptable concession to the military, which has controlled Sudan for most of its history since it became an independent state more than six decades ago.

In a televised address on Sunday evening, Mr. Hamdok said that repeated mediation attempts had failed in recent days and that the country needed to engage in a new dialogue to chart a path toward a democratic, civilian state.

His speech came just hours after security forces killed three protesters, according to the pro-democracy Central Committee of Sudan Doctors, pushing the total number of people killed in the two months since the coup to 57.

For weeks, amid speculation that the prime minister might step down, local and international leaders pressed Mr. Hamdok to hold fast.

But in the end, it did not work.

"I tried as much as I could to avoid our country from sliding into disaster," Mr. Hamdok said as he announced his resignation. "But despite my efforts to achieve the desired and necessary consensus to give citizens security, peace, justice and to stop bloodshed, that did not happen."

Months of turmoil have threatened to upend hopes for establishing a democracy in Sudan that were born after the 2019 [ouster of the country's longtime dictator](#), Omar Hassan al-Bashir. The political instability has been compounded by other challenges, including dire economic problems and fresh violence in the restive Darfur region in western Sudan.

Mr. Hamdok [was removed](#) from office in a coup on Oct. 25, then [returned to office](#) in late November after four weeks of house arrest. He was reinstated only after he signed a new power-sharing agreement with [the military leaders who had deposed him](#) in the first place.

The occasion was marked by a televised ceremony in the presidential palace, with the prime minister appearing alongside Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the army chief who ousted him and, at one point, [detained him in his own residence](#).

The two men signed a 14-point agreement which they cast as an important step forward. It included commitments to release all political detainees and to preserve the nation's path toward democracy.

The hope was that Mr. Hamdok's return to office might end the protests that followed the coup and the brutal reprisals by the security forces. But it did not turn out that way.

Members of Sudan's largest political organization, the Umma party, rejected the deal. So did some members of the Forces of Freedom and Change, a civilian coalition that shared power with the military until the coup.

The agreement also did not sit well with ordinary citizens. Jeering protesters gathered outside the presidential palace in Khartoum and elsewhere in the country — including on Sunday, the day Mr. Hamdok resigned. They called for the coup leaders to be prosecuted.

Mr. Hamdok, in particular, was accused of providing a fig leaf that allowed the military to continue dominating the political sphere.

Security officers have responded to the demonstrations with heavy force, lobbing tear gas and shooting rubber and live bullets, according to activists and protesters. Hundreds of people have been injured nationwide.

The United Nations human rights office says 13 women and girls have accused the security forces of sexual violence and has [called](#) for “a prompt, independent and thorough investigation.” The United States, the European Union and Canada, among others, last month [condemned](#) “the use of sexual and gender-based violence as a weapon to drive women away from demonstrations and silence women’s voices.”

Off the political stage, other events have pushed Sudan toward the breaking point. In recent weeks, dozens of people [have been killed and their villages burned](#) in violence between herders and farmers in West Darfur state, the United Nations said.

And Sudan’s economy is teetering, with pandemic-related shocks and closings contributing to growing unemployment and rising food prices, according to the World Bank.

That is one area that many Sudanese hoped Mr. Hamdok, a British-educated economist who once worked for the United Nations, would fix, when he was appointed prime minister in 2019 following the tumultuous protests that led to the ouster of Mr. al-Bashir.

Under an earlier civilian-military power-sharing agreement reached then, Mr. Hamdok was named to lead Sudan through a transitional period of three years, with the goal of holding free elections.

His government succeeded in a number of ways, by [broadening personal freedoms](#), banning female genital mutilation, [signing a deal with rebel groups](#) and helping to get Sudan [removed from a U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism](#).

“I have had the honor of serving my countrymen for more than two years,” Mr. Hamdok said Sunday, “and during this period, I have sometimes done well, and I have sometimes failed.”

The civilian-military coalition was fraught, in part because the generals worried that their privileges, long jealously guarded, might evaporate. With Mr. Hamdok’s resignation, protests are likely to continue, analysts said, intensifying pressure against the military. That has the potential to push members of the armed groups to abandon their deal with the government, further undermining the legitimacy of General al-Burhan and his allies.

“The option of a civilian-military partnership is getting bleaker by the day,” said Jihad Mashamoun, a Sudanese researcher and analyst.

To complete the country’s transition to democracy, Mr. Hamdok said Sunday, it is paramount to open a dialogue that will bring all Sudanese people to the table.

“Our country is going through a dangerous turning point that may threaten its entire survival if it is not remedied soon,” he said.

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HEADLINE	01/02 Governor: Maryland ‘terrible point’ in crisis
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/02/world/maryland-covid-larry-hogan.html
GIST	Gov. Larry Hogan of Maryland said Sunday that the next few weeks could be one of the worst periods of the coronavirus epidemic yet, and that the state was working against staffing shortages in “overflowing” hospitals.

“We believe that the next four to six weeks are really going to be a terrible point in this crisis, and it’s potentially going to be the worst part of the whole two-year fight,” Mr. Hogan said on the CNN program “State of the Union.”

Despite having one of the highest vaccination rates in the nation, hospitals were filled with unvaccinated patients, he said.

“We’re going to take and continue to take every action we possibly can to help our hospitals, our nursing homes and to keep people safe,” he said.

One of the challenges for the weeks ahead will be maintaining staffing in medical facilities. Many doctors and nurses have been coming down with Covid, he said, and were also exhausted.

“You can’t really manufacture doctors and nurses that don’t exist, and frankly, these heroes on the front line that have been working so hard for two years, there’s fatigue,” Mr. Hogan said. To mitigate the crisis, the state put emergency funding into hospitals and nursing homes and sped up the graduations of nursing students, amid other measures.

Maryland’s hospitals, like those in many other states, are [reaching capacity](#). The state reported a rolling average of more than 8,800 new cases a day on Jan. 1, an increase of more than 560 percent over the last two weeks, according to a [New York Times database](#). Hospitalizations are up by more than 60 percent to an average of nearly 2,400.

It’s unclear how many hospitalizations are patients infected with Omicron versus the Delta variant, which is thought to be significantly more virulent. According to the C.D.C., [about 58 percent of cases](#) in Maryland and nearby states are currently Omicron.

The Maryland Hospital Association said that the number of hospital patients [surpassed the state’s Covid peak from last winter](#).

The chief medical officer at the Anne Arundel Medical Center in Annapolis told MSNBC that the state was “[at a tipping point](#),” and that there were no beds left open.

Mr. Hogan also talked about his recent breakthrough case of the coronavirus.

“Because I had that protection,” Mr. Hogan said of the vaccine, “I had sort of a bad cold. What we’re faced with now — unfortunately, this new omicron variant is impacting just about everyone, including many people who are fully protected, but it’s keeping them out of the hospital and that’s the thing we have to keep in mind.”

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HEADLINE	01/02 Sri Lanka on brink of bankruptcy
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/02/covid-crisis-sri-lanka-bankruptcy-poverty-pandemic-food-prices
GIST	<p>Sri Lanka is facing a deepening financial and humanitarian crisis with fears it could go bankrupt in 2022 as inflation rises to record levels, food prices rocket and its coffers run dry.</p> <p>The meltdown faced by the government, led by the strongman president Gotabaya Rajapaksa, is in part caused by the immediate impact of the Covid crisis and the loss of tourism but is compounded by high government spending and tax cuts eroding state revenues, vast debt repayments to China and foreign exchange reserves at their lowest levels in a decade. Inflation has meanwhile been spurred by the government printing money to pay off domestic loans and foreign bonds.</p> <p>The World Bank estimates 500,000 people have fallen below the poverty line since the beginning of the pandemic, the equivalent of five years’ progress in fighting poverty.</p>

Inflation hit a record high of 11.1% in November and escalating prices have left those who were previously well off struggling to feed their families, while basic goods are now unaffordable for many. After Rajapaksa declared Sri Lanka to be in an economic emergency, the military was given power to ensure essential items, including rice and sugar, were sold at set government prices – but it has done little to ease people's woes.

Anurudda Paranagama, a chauffeur in the capital, Colombo, took on a second job to pay for rising food costs and cover the loan on his car but it was not enough. "It is very difficult for me to repay the loan. When I have to pay electricity and water bills and spend on food, there is no money left," he said, adding that his family now eats two meals a day instead of three.

He described how his village grocer was opening 1kg packets of milk powder and dividing it into packs of 100g because his customers could not afford the whole packet. "We now buy 100g of beans when we used to buy 1kg for the week," said Paranagama.

The loss of jobs and vital foreign revenue from tourism, which usually contributes more than 10% of GDP, has been substantial, with more than 200,000 people losing their livelihoods in the travel and tourism sectors, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council.

The situation has got so bad that long queues have formed at the passport office as one in four Sri Lankans, mostly the young and educated, say they want to leave the country. For older citizens, it is reminiscent of the early 1970s when import controls and low production at home caused severe shortages of basic commodities and caused long queues for bread, milk and rice.

The former central bank deputy governor WA Wijewardena warned the struggles of ordinary people would exacerbate the financial crisis, which would in turn make life harder for them. "When the economic crisis deepens beyond redemption, it is inevitable that the country will have a financial crisis too," he said. "Both will reduce food security by lowering production and failing to import due to foreign exchange scarcities. At that point, it will be a humanitarian crisis."

One of the most pressing problems for Sri Lanka is its huge foreign debt burden, in particular to China. It owes China more than \$5bn in debt and last year took an additional \$1bn loan from Beijing to help with its acute financial crisis, which is being paid in instalments.

In the next 12 months, in the government and private sector, Sri Lanka will be required to repay an estimated \$7.3bn in domestic and foreign loans, including a \$500m international sovereign bond repayment in January. However, as of November, available foreign currency reserves were just \$1.6bn.

In an unusual approach, government minister Ramesh Pathirana said they hoped to settle their past oil debts with Iran by paying them with tea, sending them \$5m worth of tea every month in order to save "much needed currency".

The opposition MP and economist Harsha de Silva recently told parliament that foreign currency reserves would be -\$437m by January next year, while the total foreign debt to service would be \$4.8bn from February to October 2022. "The nation will be totally bankrupt," he said.

Central Bank Governor Ajith Nivard Cabraal made public assurances that Sri Lanka could pay off its debts "seamlessly" but Wijewardena said the country was at substantial risk of defaulting on its repayments, which would have catastrophic economic consequences.

Meanwhile, Rajapaksa's sudden decision in May to ban all fertiliser and pesticides and force farmers to go organic without warning has brought a formerly prosperous agricultural community to its knees as many farmers, who had become used to using – and often overusing – fertiliser and pesticides, were suddenly left without ways to produce healthy crops or combat weeds and insects. Many fearing a loss decided not to cultivate crops at all, adding to the food shortages in Sri Lanka.

	<p>The government made a dramatic U-turn in late October and farmers are now struggling to cover the high costs of imported fertiliser without help.</p> <p>“The costs of cultivating paddy [wheat] have gone up astronomically ... The government has no money for fertiliser subsidies. Many of us farmers are reluctant to invest money because we don’t know if we will make any profit,” said one farmer, Ranjit Hulugalle.</p> <p>In an attempt temporarily to ease the problems and stave off difficult and most likely unpopular policies, the government has resorted to temporary relief measures, such as credit lines to import foods, medicines and fuel from its neighbouring ally India, as well as currency swaps from India, China and Bangladesh and loans to purchase petroleum from Oman. However, these loans provide only short-term relief and have to be paid back quickly at high interest rates, adding to Sri Lanka’s debt load.</p> <p>Anushka Shanuka, a personal trainer, was among those who used to have a comfortable life but now is struggling to get by. “We can’t live the way we used to before the pandemic,” he said, saying the prices of vegetables had gone up by more than 50%.</p> <p>“The government promised to help us but nothing came, so we are just managing the best we can. I don’t know how much longer we can go on like this.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/02 Omicron takes a toll on businesses
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/omicron-takes-a-toll-on-businesses-from-airports-to-bars-and-supermarkets-11641144710?mod=hp_lead_pos3
GIST	<p>The rapid spread of Covid-19’s Omicron variant is weighing on U.S. businesses, keeping more workers home sick or quarantined and leading some companies to cut services and reduce hours.</p> <p>The rise of U.S. Covid-19 infections to record levels in recent days has driven thousands of canceled flights, prompted retailers to train available employees on new jobs, and closed some stores altogether, companies said. The rapidly spreading Omicron variant is hitting businesses at a time when consumers’ demand for products and services has surged, and many companies already are struggling with staffing and supply-chain challenges.</p> <p>Airlines over the weekend canceled thousands of flights, capping a week in which carriers scrubbed more than 1,000 flights each day, according to data compiled by FlightAware. In addition to snowstorms that snarled airports in the Pacific Northwest and Midwest, airlines including Delta Air Lines Inc., JetBlue Airways Corp. and United Airlines Holdings Inc. said rising Covid-19 infections among crew members hampered their abilities to staff flights at the same time holiday travel was rebounding from 2020 levels.</p> <p>New York-based JetBlue trimmed its flight schedule through mid-January as more crew members contract the virus, a problem that Chief Executive Robin Hayes said has become harder to navigate than when the pandemic first emerged in early 2020.</p> <p>“This is really the first time we have a...very transmissive phase, variant of Covid at the same time that we’re in a peak travel period,” Mr. Hayes said.</p> <p>He predicted other airlines will increasingly face similar staffing challenges. “It’ll move around, not just the U.S., but move around the world,” he said.</p> <p>Supermarket operators said they anticipate the Omicron variant’s spread will drive increased absences among cashiers, stockers and other employees in the days ahead, deepening staffing problems the grocery sector has faced for months.</p>

“The industry generally mirrors the overall population, so I think this is somewhat inevitable that it will hit everywhere,” said Neil Stern, CEO of Good Food Holdings LLC. The company operates more than 50 West Coast stores, including the Bristol Farms and Metropolitan Market chains.

In Williamsville, N.Y., Tops Markets LLC said it is relying on overtime and asking available workers to cover additional shifts across the company’s 162 grocery stores. The company said it is training employees across multiple departments as it monitors what the chain’s officials called a significant increase in the number of Covid-19 cases among its workers.

Increasing infections have led some retailers to temporarily close stores, such as [Apple](#) Inc., which limited access to New York City-area locations, including its iconic Fifth Avenue flagship.

Some business leaders, including executives of Delta and JetBlue, this month called on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [to reduce its recommended isolation time](#) for vaccinated people, a move they said would help get healthcare workers, airline crew members and others back on the job more quickly. The CDC last week [cut its recommended isolation time](#) to five days from 10, citing new research and the stress on businesses due to worker absences.

[Toyota Motor](#) Corp. , which employs about 48,000 people across more than 20 facilities in the U.S., said it has generally been carrying extra staff in anticipation that a certain number of workers might be quarantined. The company can test workers on site and has been tracking cases, including exposure and infections, among its employees.

“That said, we do not yet know what will happen in January,” a Toyota spokesman said. The Japanese auto maker is aligning its policies with the new CDC guidelines, which the spokesman said will reduce isolation times.

Delta is also implementing [the shorter isolation times](#), the company has said. A Southwest Airlines Co. spokeswoman said the Dallas-based carrier was reviewing the CDC’s revised isolation guidance.

The Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, a labor union, has pushed back on the new CDC recommendations, warning that it could mean infectious workers crewing flights or boarding planes as passengers. The union has called for the prior 10-day isolation period to be maintained, along with additional testing and masking practices.

JetBlue’s Mr. Hayes said the revised CDC guidance protected public health while allowing society to continue to function. He said the new recommendations enabled the airline to begin bringing employees back to work and to maintain operations.

“We’re still losing more people every day than we’re getting come back,” Mr. Hayes said. “Many of our crew members are really stepping up and taking additional shifts.”

The deepening challenges that Omicron’s spread poses for businesses have led some economists to cut their [growth forecasts for early 2022](#), anticipating continuing worker shortages for companies and reduced consumer spending on travel and entertainment. So far, economists have said, the new variant [hasn’t driven jobless claims](#) noticeably higher.

Some businesses said they are managing, including meatpacking companies, whose workers were among the hardest hit when the coronavirus began spreading in the U.S. in early 2020. Smithfield Foods Inc., the biggest U.S. pork processor by sales, said cases among its employees remain below the general population. Other meat companies, including [Tyson Foods](#) Inc., JBS USA Holdings Inc. and Cargill Inc., said they have had no operational disruptions because of the recent surge in Covid-19 cases.

Bar Louie, a chain based in Addison, Texas, has recently scaled back hours at some of its roughly 70 restaurants because of staffing shortages, Chief Operating Officer Damian Mazza said. The company has

	<p>maintained mask requirements for workers throughout the pandemic, but as Omicron spreads, cases among workers have jumped in some markets, Mr. Mazza said.</p> <p>Bar Louie is coping, he said, thanks partly to a simpler menu the chain developed during the pandemic that has helped its kitchens operate with reduced staff and other Covid-19 related disruptions. The company has beefed up to-go and delivery options to keep selling food during case surges, Mr. Mazza said.</p> <p>Still, he said, Bar Louie locations have recently reduced their hours at times, “to ensure our team members are not overworked.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/02 Double-team a new challenge to US power?
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-russia-america-military-exercises-weapons-war-xi-putin-biden-11641146041?mod=hp_lead_pos8
GIST	<p>Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping oversaw an ambitious joint military exercise in China this summer, which along with reported collaborations in aviation, undersea and hypersonic-weapons technology point to a solidifying defense alignment, according to military analysts.</p> <p>U.S. officials and military specialists say it is difficult to pin down the level of collaboration between two nations that tightly control information, and whose actions are increasingly opaque to outsiders. But Western officials and defense experts are growing more convinced of the closer relationship based on recent economic alliances, military exercises and joint defense development, as well as the few public statements from government leaders.</p> <p>While U.S. officials have long been skeptical of a unified threat from the two countries, some are now changing their tune. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence reported that Beijing and Moscow are now more aligned than at any point in the past 60 years.</p> <p>“They are distinct threats. But they are now interrelated because of the collaboration,” said Michael Kofman, a Russian military expert at CNA, a nonprofit research and analysis group in Arlington, Va.</p> <p>Biden administration officials say they are watching closely but caution against reading too much into actions unlikely to flower into a full military alliance.</p> <p>China and Russia, which share a 2,500-mile border, have competing interests in Central Asia, India and the Arctic that prevent a complete alignment. And unlike countries in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, defense systems in China and Russia aren’t broadly compatible, limiting the effectiveness of a joint command.</p> <p>Yet U.S. steps to contain the two countries have driven them into a marriage of convenience, giving the previously contentious rivals an incentive to marshal resources and intelligence against a common adversary, according to analysts and U.S. officials. China and Russia are eager to restrain U.S. influence as well as its military and financial potency, which they believe more likely if they work in tandem, according to analysts.</p> <p>Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said in June that the relationship between China and Russia was poised to reach a “larger scale, broader field, and deeper level.” Mr. Putin said relations with China were at historic levels.</p> <p>While Washington grappled with the collapse of Afghanistan, Chinese and Russian troops in August executed military drills in northwestern China. The exercises were the first to use a joint Russian-Chinese command-and-control set up, signaling a growing ability to coordinate in any potential action against the U.S., according to analysts.</p>

Roughly 13,000 troops and hundreds of aircraft, drones, artillery pieces, antiaircraft batteries and armored vehicles gathered in the Ningxia province. China's minister of national defense, Wei Fenghe said the military exercises showed a "high level of development of inter-army ties." In October, the two countries launched joint naval drills off Russia's Far East coast.

The U.S. intelligence community's declassified [Worldwide Threat Assessment](#) in 2019 was the first such report to label China and Russia jointly as a regional threat. "We anticipate that they will collaborate to counter U.S. objectives," the report said.

Relations between China and Russia intensified under U.S. pressure, starting in 2014. That year, the U.S. and its allies initiated sanctions against Russian entities and individuals over the Kremlin's annexing of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea and fomenting rebellion in Ukraine's east.

[In a conference call Thursday, President Biden warned Mr. Putin](#) that the U.S. would impose onerous sanctions against Russia if the Kremlin's military buildup on the border of Ukraine moved to an invasion. Mr. Putin said such sanctions would lead to a dangerous rupture in relations with the U.S.

For China's part, a combination of sharpening U.S. rhetoric, tension over Chinese defense agreements in the Middle East and Africa, and a U.S.-U.K. nuclear submarine deal with Australia have formalized a great-power competition with the U.S. Beijing's claims over Taiwan and parts of the South China Sea are further tension points with the potential for a military clash involving the U.S.

"There is quite a common ground between Moscow and Beijing in terms of what we dislike in Washington's politics," Kremlin press secretary Dmitry Peskov said in October. "We dislike the deficit of mutual respect in Washington's approach. We like a devoted noninterference principle. On this ground, we [Russia and China] are close to each other."

In October, after years of Russian ambiguity regarding Taiwan, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said the Kremlin considered the island nation a part of China.

Moscow and Beijing also see advantages of increased engagement in trade, technology and energy. Over the past six years, Messrs Putin and Xi have met more than 30 times.

"The conversation first was that Russia and China are not going to align," said Mr. Kofman, the Russian military expert. "Then the conversation was, it appears there's an alignment, but it's not very significant. Then it evolved to, there's an alignment, and it is significant, but it probably won't last. And that conversation is now evolving into the next stage."

Double team

For decades leading into China's economic boom, Russia served as the country's chief arms supplier.

After a period of political discord, the partnership renewed in 2014 with China's agreement to buy Russia's S-400 advanced antiaircraft system. A year later, China ordered Russian-made Su-35 jet fighters, which enhanced Beijing's ability to strike U.S. warships. The U.S. sanctioned China for these deals.

In 2019, Mr. Putin said Russia and China were codeveloping China's antimissile early-warning system. The following year, he said that Moscow was assisting Beijing's military with technology too sensitive for him to talk about. Russian state media later reported that China and Russia were developing a top-secret submarine.

China's development of advanced computer chips gave Russia an avenue to military technologies cut off by Western sanctions.

"In a triangle with three countries, you don't want to be the one opposite the other two," said Andrea Kendall-Taylor, who worked on Russian issues at the Central Intelligence Agency and is now at the Center for a New American Security, a Democrat-leaning national-security think tank in Washington.

Military exercises between the two countries began in the mid-2000s. These maneuvers have become more frequent and complex, allowing for regular senior-level military contacts, exchanges and technical cooperation.

In 2018, the year after the two nations signed a memorandum of understanding for military cooperation, Russia invited China for the first time to its largest annual defense exercise. The following year, the two countries engaged in their first joint bomber patrols near Japan and the Korean Peninsula, drawing warning shots from South Korean pilots.

In October, Russia and China held joint naval drills in the Sea of Japan where they practiced how to jointly destroy floating enemy mines with artillery fire, according to the Russian defense ministry.

The following month, Russia's minister of defense, Sergei Shoigu and Mr. Wei, his Chinese counterpart, held a video conference where two countries agreed to increase interaction between their armed forces through strategic military exercises and joint patrols.

'Fundamental leverage'

For the first nine months of 2021, bilateral trade between China and Russia exceeded \$100 billion, nearly equaling trade for all of 2020, according to official Russian data. It reached \$123 billion in November, Mr. Putin said.

In August, the two countries completed the construction of the first rail bridge between them, spanning Siberia's Amur River. The \$55 billion Power of Siberia pipeline, a 1,865-mile channel that began operation in 2019, is forecast to deliver as much as 1.3 trillion cubic feet of Russian natural gas to China by 2025.

China and Russia don't have a formal defense alliance and are unlikely to give up any autonomy through the military and political commitments that an alliance would require, according to analysts. Even so, the countries' growing ties are seen as enough to make an impact on relations with the U.S.

"Improving the relationship with Moscow is fundamental leverage that China can take," said Zhu Feng, the director of the Institute of International Studies at Nanjing University. "It's in the tool kit to respond to America's containment of China."

U.S. tensions with Russia give cover to China, said Vasily Kashin, a military expert and China specialist at Moscow's Higher School of Economics. "The U.S. cannot hope to prevail without concentrating all of its resources on the Pacific," he said. "Russia, together with Iran, are the countries which are making such concentration almost impossible."

Areas of disharmony between China and Russia tantalize U.S. officials with the possibility of driving a wedge between the two countries, analysts said.

Beijing maintains working relations with Ukraine, running counter to Russian interests. Russia in October [terminated relations with NATO](#), but China, eager to continue advancing its Belt and Road initiatives across Europe, continues to work with the group.

Moscow maintains relations with Chinese rivals Vietnam and South Korea. Russia is a major arms supplier to India, a longtime Beijing rival that also bought the S-400 anti-aircraft system.

One idea to divide the two countries is for the U.S. to soften its approach to Russia and draw Moscow away from Beijing. But such a strategy remains embryonic, according to analysts, especially when the U.S. appears disinclined to offer the kind of political and economic incentives that would persuade Mr. Putin to loosen ties with Mr. Xi.

	<p>And with Russian troops amassing on the Ukrainian border, sharpening longstanding tensions between Moscow and Washington, attempts to persuade Russia to cleave itself from a defense alignment with China appear unlikely to bear fruit.</p> <p>“You’re never going to convince Russia they should make an enemy of a powerful country like China,” Mr. Kofman said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/02 Cloth masks not enough in omicron surge?
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/cloth-face-mask-omicron-11640984082?mod=hp_lead_pos11
GIST	<p>Doctors and healthcare systems say it might be time to change your face masks.</p> <p>With infections surging due to the fast-spreading Omicron variant, including among the vaccinated, physicians are now urging people to ditch cloth face masks, which they say may not provide enough protection against the virus. Instead, they recommend pairing cloth masks with surgical models or moving on to stronger respirator masks.</p> <p>The Mayo Clinic began on Thursday requiring all patients and visitors to wear surgical masks or N95 or KN95 masks. Anyone wearing a single-layer, homemade cloth mask, gaiter or bandanna, or a mask with a vent, will be provided a medical-grade mask to wear over it.</p> <p>Single-layer cloth masks, which many people prefer for comfort and style, can block larger droplets carrying the virus, but aren’t as effective in blocking smaller aerosols or particles carrying the virus, according to infectious-disease specialists.</p> <p>The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s most recent guidance recommends that people wear masks, including cloth ones that are multilayered and tightly woven, that fit snugly and have an adjustable wire nose bridge. It also suggests layering masks, using a disposable mask underneath a cloth mask and reserving N95 masks for healthcare workers.</p> <p>But many professionals in the field say certain masks are more effective than others in protecting people from the Omicron variant and that cloth masks alone aren’t.</p> <p>“If you really want no exposure, you have to wear the right type of mask,” says Monica Gandhi, an infectious disease specialist at the University of California, San Francisco. Dr. Gandhi recommends N95 masks, which are certified in the U.S., or the KN95, KF94 and FFP2 masks, which are certified in China, South Korea and Europe respectively. If those aren’t available, she recommends double masking—a multilayered cloth mask tightly on top of a surgical mask. Surgical masks are made of polypropylene, which has electrostatic charge characteristics that block the virus.</p> <p>“If everyone is just wearing a cloth mask or just a surgical mask, it won’t make any difference” with this highly-transmissible variant, she says.</p> <p>Others in the field say high-quality surgical masks, worn properly, offer protection, but they would also like more data and research on how they stand up against Omicron.</p> <p>N95 masks, which are certified by the U.S. National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, have a denser network of fibers than surgical or cloth masks. That tighter mesh, together with an electrostatic charge in the material, generally makes such masks the most efficient at trapping larger droplets and aerosols that are exhaled by the wearer. They also better block such particles from being inhaled.</p> <p>Properly fitted, certified N95 masks can filter up to 95% of particles in the air.</p> <p>“Any mask is better than no mask. But cloth masks and then surgical masks are not as good as N95-caliber masks,” says Ranu Dhillon, a physician at Brigham and Women’s Hospital.</p>

Megan Srinivas, a clinician and infectious disease specialist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, says she and other family members wear KN95 masks, which have five layers of overlapping material and a tighter fit to reduce droplets from escaping or entering. She would recommend those same masks, which come in children's sizes, to parents getting ready to [send their children to school](#) in the new year. If those aren't available, she suggests disposable authorized surgical masks.

"We need to educate the public and say that different quality masks offer different protection," she says.

Graham Snyder, medical director of infection prevention and hospital epidemiology at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, says any quality mask that offers an effective seal and is worn correctly—covering the nose and mouth—offers protection.

Dr. Snyder says he would like data from the CDC on how Omicron spreads and whether the transmission is related to the types of masks. He is concerned about the number of people in the community who don't wear masks of any type.

"Masking works. Period," he says.

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HEADLINE	12/31 WA definition of 'fully vaccinated'
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3296099/definition-fully-vaccinated-washington-state/
GIST	<p>If you got your first COVID-19 vaccination shots a year ago and haven't been able to find a booster yet, health officials say you're still OK to eat out in King County restaurants.</p> <p>Lacy Fehrenbach, deputy secretary for Washington state's COVID response, said two doses of COVID-19 vaccine is considered fully vaccinated.</p> <p>Fehrenbach said the state has no plans, currently, to change the definition of "fully vaccinated" to those who are boosted. That definition also lines up with what the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines as fully vaccinated.</p> <p>Over time, however, health experts say the vaccines' effectiveness does start to slowly wane. People are advised to get boosters six months after a Pfizer-Moderna series, or two months after Johnson & Johnson.</p> <p>About 205 million (62%) Americans are fully vaccinated, and about 4.9 million (75.6%) Washingtonians are fully vaccinated as of Dec. 20. In contrast, the CDC says about 68.8 million (33%) of those who are fully vaccinated have received a booster shot, and the state DOH estimates 1.8 million Washingtonians have received a third shot.</p> <p>As the highly transmissible omicron variant spreads across the country, more organizations and businesses are requiring people to obtain a booster before they're considered "fully vaccinated," and thus, eligible to enter public spaces and events.</p> <p>On Tuesday, Dr. Rochelle P. Walensky, the CDC director, said they're working on clarifying the definition now, according to the New York Times.</p> <p>"There really isn't debate here in what people should do," she added. "C.D.C. is crystal-clear on what people should do: If they're eligible for a boost, they should get boosted."</p> <p>The remnants of the delta variant and the rise of omicron variant pushed the seven-day rolling average of new daily COVID-19 cases in the U.S. above 350,000, nearly triple the rate of just two weeks ago, according to figures from Johns Hopkins University.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/03 Omicron clouds pandemic end forecast
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/pandemic-end-omicron-clouds-forecasts-endgame-82048388
GIST	<p>Pandemics do eventually end, even if omicron is complicating the question of when this one will. But it won't be like flipping a light switch: The world will have to learn to coexist with a virus that's not going away.</p> <p>The ultra-contagious omicron mutant is pushing cases to all-time highs and causing chaos as an exhausted world struggles, again, to stem the spread. But this time, we're not starting from scratch.</p> <p>Vaccines offer strong protection from serious illness, even if they don't always prevent a mild infection. Omicron doesn't appear to be as deadly as some earlier variants. And those who survive it will have some refreshed protection against other forms of the virus that still are circulating — and maybe the next mutant to emerge, too.</p> <p>The newest variant is a warning about what will continue to happen “unless we really get serious about the endgame,” said Dr. Albert Ko, an infectious disease specialist at the Yale School of Public Health.</p> <p>“Certainly COVID will be with us forever,” Ko added. “We’re never going to be able to eradicate or eliminate COVID, so we have to identify our goals.”</p> <p>At some point, the World Health Organization will determine when enough countries have tamped down their COVID-19 cases sufficiently — or at least, hospitalizations and deaths — to declare the pandemic officially over. Exactly what that threshold will be isn’t clear.</p> <p>Even when that happens, some parts of the world still will struggle — especially low-income countries that lack enough vaccines or treatments — while others more easily transition to what scientists call an “endemic” state.</p> <p>They’re fuzzy distinctions, said infectious disease expert Stephen Kissler of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. He defines the endemic period as reaching “some sort of acceptable steady state” to deal with COVID-19.</p> <p>The omicron crisis shows we’re not there yet but “I do think we will reach a point where SARS-CoV-2 is endemic much like flu is endemic,” he said.</p> <p>For comparison, COVID-19 has killed more than 800,000 Americans in two years while flu typically kills between 12,000 and 52,000 a year.</p> <p>Exactly how much continuing COVID-19 illness and death the world will put up with is largely a social question, not a scientific one.</p> <p>“We’re not going to get to a point where it’s 2019 again,” said Dr. Amesh Adalja, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security. “We’ve got to get people to think about risk tolerance.”</p> <p>Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious disease expert, is looking ahead to controlling the virus in a way “that does not disrupt society, that does not disrupt the economy.”</p> <p>Already the U.S. is sending signals that it’s on the road to whatever will become the new normal. The Biden administration says there are enough tools — vaccine boosters, new treatments and masking — to handle even the omicron threat without the shutdowns of the pandemic’s earlier days. And the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention just reduced to five days the time that people with COVID-19 must stay in isolation so they don’t sicken others, saying it's become clear they’re most contagious early on.</p> <p>India offers a glimpse of what it’s like to get to a stable level of COVID-19. Until recently, daily reported cases had remained below 10,000 for six months but only after a cost in lives “too traumatic to calculate”</p>

caused by the earlier delta variant, said Dr. T. Jacob John, former chief of virology at Christian Medical College in southern India.

Omicron now is fueling a rise in cases again, and the country in January will roll out vaccine boosters for frontline workers. But John said other endemic diseases, such as flu and measles, periodically cause outbreaks and the coronavirus will continue to flare up every so often even after omicron passes through.

Omicron is so hugely mutated that it is slipping past some of the protection of vaccinations or prior infection. But Dr. William Moss of Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health expects “this virus will kind of max out” in its ability to make such big evolutionary jumps. “I don’t see this as kind of an endless cycle of new variants.”

One possible future many experts see: In the post-pandemic period, the virus causes colds for some and more serious illness for others, depending on their overall health, vaccine status and prior infections. Mutations will continue and might eventually require boosters every so often that are updated to better match new variants.

But human immune systems will continue to get better at recognizing and fighting back. Immunologist Ali Ellebedy at Washington University at St. Louis finds hope in the body’s amazing ability to remember germs it’s seen before and create multi-layer defenses.

Memory B cells are one of those layers, cells that live for years in the bone marrow, ready to swing into action and produce more antibodies when needed. But first those memory cells get trained in immune system boot camps called germinal centers, learning to do more than just make copies of their original antibodies.

In a new study, Ellebedy’s team found Pfizer vaccinations rev up “T helper cells” that act as the drill sergeant in those training camps, driving production of more diverse and stronger antibodies that may work even if the virus changes again.

Ellebedy said baseline population immunity has improved so much that even as breakthrough infections inevitably continue, there will be a drop in severe illnesses, hospitalizations and deaths — regardless of the next variant.

“We are not the same population that we were in December of 2019,” he said. “It’s different ground now.”

Think of a wildfire tearing through a forest after a drought, he said. That was 2020. Now, even with omicron, “it’s not completely dry land,” but wet enough “that made the fire harder to spread.”

He foresees a day when someone gets a coronavirus infection, stays home two to three days “and then you move on. That hopefully will be the endgame.”

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HEADLINE	01/02 Quebec begins retail store closures
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/quebec-begins-retail-store-closures-amid-covid-19-82047584
GIST	<p>MONTREAL, Quebec -- Quebec proceeded with the first of three planned closures of non-essential retail stores Sunday as the provincial government tried to curb a new wave of COVID-19 driven by the highly infectious Omicron variant.</p> <p>Hospitals and health-care resources in Quebec and Canada’s remote northern communities are also being stretched as case numbers explode.</p> <p>Quebec Premier Francois Legault announced last week that the bulk of the province’s stores would be closed for the next three Sundays, with the exception of pharmacies, convenience stores and gas stations.</p>

Charles Milliard, president of the Quebec Federation of Chambers of Commerce, urged the government to lift the measures as soon as possible.

“The last thing businesses need during these difficult times is additional restrictions” Milliard said in a statement. “We must leave the choice to businesses to open or close at the time that makes the most sense for them, their employees and their customers.”

The closures came as Quebec reported 15,845 new COVID-19 cases, as well as 13 additional deaths linked to the virus.

The Health Department said the number of hospitalizations linked to the disease rose by 70 to 1,231. It said 162 people are in intensive care, an increase of nine.

Quebec City’s main hospital network says it will postpone half of its surgeries and medical appointments starting Wednesday due to the spike in COVID patients.

Martin Beaumont, President and CEO of the CHU de Québec-Université Laval, told a news conference that as many as 10,000 medical appointments could be delayed, allowing roughly 50 nurses to also be redirected to the pandemic’s ward.

The hospital network says 783 health-care workers are in isolation, in addition to the 600 nurses already missing from the workforce before the pandemic’s fifth wave hit.

The strain caused by the growing number of cases is exacerbated in remote communities where health care is already limited.

Bearskin Lake First Nation, a fly-in only community in northern Ontario, declared a state of emergency on Dec. 30 when 43 residents tested positive for the virus. By Sunday, 169 people had confirmed or suspected cases of COVID-19, more than 40 per cent of the total population.

“That’s a crisis,” Nishnawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief Derek Fox said in an interview.

Bearskin Lake has no hospital and is usually served by a nursing station with two nurses. An emergency evacuation would take more than three hours for a plane to get in and out from Sioux Lookout or Thunder Bay, and that’s only if weather permits it to land.

A federal rapid response team with three primary care nurses, a paramedic and two environmental health officers landed in Bearskin Lake on Dec. 30, bringing more testing capacity with them. Two public health nurses were sent by the Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority as well.

Outbreaks in remote communities are also affecting Nunavut, northern Quebec and Labrador.

Nunavut confirmed another 22 cases of COVID-19 Sunday, bringing the total to 196 in just 10 days.

Nunavut is discouraging all non-essential travel within the territory and has banned non-essential travel to and from several communities, including Iqaluit, Rankin Inlet, Arviat, Igloolik and Pangnirtung.

Travel bans are also in place now in Nunavik in northern Quebec until mid-January, with only critical or essential travel allowed into or out of the region’s 14 villages.

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HEADLINE	01/03 Turkey inflation hits 19yr high: 36%
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/turkeys-inflation-hits-19-year-high-36-82048794
GIST	ANKARA, Turkey -- Turkey’s yearly inflation climbed by the fastest pace in 19 years, jumping to 36.08% in December, official data showed on Monday.

The Turkish Statistical Institute said the consumer price index increased by 13.58% in December from the previous month, further eroding peoples' purchasing power. The yearly increase in food prices was 43.8%, the data showed.

The yearly inflation rate was the highest since September 2002.

Inflation has been rising in the country while the Turkish lira has been slumping to record lows after the country's central bank — under pressure from President Recep Tayyip Erdogan — cut a key interest rate by 5 percentage points in September.

The weakened lira has made imports, fuel and everyday items more expensive and has left many in the country of some 84 million struggling to buy food and other basic goods. Many have been purchasing foreign currencies and gold to protect their savings.

Last month, Erdogan announced measures to safeguard lira deposits against volatility after the Turkish currency hit an all-time low of 18.36 against the dollar. The lira rebounded following the announcement but has since lost some of those gains. The lira depreciated by around 44% against the dollar last year.

Erdogan insists on lowering borrowing costs to boost growth, even though economists argue that higher interest rates is the way to tame soaring prices.

Also on Monday, Erdogan announced that Turkey's exports increased by 32.9% in 2021, to reach "a record" \$225.4 billion.

Addressing a group of exporters in a televised speech, Erdogan said the figure amounted to a 7.8% narrowing of Turkey's trade deficit. Turkey would revise its export target for 2022 to \$250 billion, he added.

Meanwhile, the independent Inflation Research Group, made up of academics and former government officials, put the yearly inflation rate at a much higher 83%. It said consumer prices rose by 19.35% in December compared with November.

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HEADLINE	01/01 Prices to keep soaring in 2022
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/01/economy/inflation-prices-2022-preview/index.html
GIST	<p>New York (CNN Business)America is finishing the year with decades-high inflation. That doesn't bode well for 2022.</p> <p>Prices have climbed so high it will take some time for them to come back down to earth. In other words, the uncomfortable inflation numbers of 2021 will likely stay with us well into the New Year.</p> <p>The most recent price data we have is from November, when two of the most watched inflation measures — the consumer price index and the personal consumption expenditure index — each climbed to a 39-year high.</p> <p>The latter index is what the Federal Reserve pays the most attention to when assessing the nation's inflation.</p> <p>There's some room for optimism: The central bank, which is tasked with keeping prices stable, is rolling back its pandemic stimulus and is expected to raise interest rates next year to tame inflation and stop the economy from overheating.</p> <p>And last month's data actually showed that prices increased at a slower rate in November than in October for both the CPI and the PCE indices. That's good news, even though the slowdown was small at only 0.1 percentage points.</p>

But here's the thing: Economists prefer to look at price movements over a period of time, usually 12 months. So a small slowdown like November's won't move the needle just yet.

In fact, it might take months for these incremental slowdowns to show up in the data. After a year of prices soaring on high demand and supply chain chaos, a lot of big numbers are baked into the 12-month data set. Even if inflation suddenly falls off a cliff, it would take time for the leading indices to reflect that. This is what Fed Chair Jerome Powell is talking about when he mentions "base effects."

Why will inflation remain high?

Several factors are keeping prices elevated.

One is the supply chain chaos that came to a head last summer. Even though some bottlenecks have eased, the issues are not fully resolved. And as long as it's more expensive — and takes more time — to move goods around the world, higher transport costs will likely be passed down to consumers.

Another big contributor is the high cost of commodity prices, leading to surging energy and food costs. Prices in both sectors have soared this year and added a good chunk to the inflation we have already seen. In the case of food, high prices have [forced some consumers to buy less or switch stores](#).

Economists don't expect that to get any better next year. Aside from high demand and shipping costs, [rising prices for fertilizer and continued bad weather](#) could keep food prices high even as other pandemic fueled inflation pressures ease.

Rising rents also remain a concern. This is important because housing represents a big percentage of what people spend money on. If rents eat up a bigger piece of the pie, consumers might wind up spending less, which would be bad news for the recovery.

In November, rent rose 0.4% for the third month in a row, according to economists at Bank of America, and that points to higher and more persistent inflation going forward.

The "recent broadening of inflationary pressure has coincided with a notable pickup in rental inflation," said Peter B. McCrory, economist at JPMorgan, "which jumped to its highest monthly rate in 20 years in the September CPI report and has stayed firm since then."

And [then there's Omicron](#).

Several countries, including the [United States](#), have seen record high Covid-19 infections in recent weeks because of the rapidly spreading variant. If this leads to a new round of lockdowns, it could once again change the way consumers spend and boost demand for stay-at-home goods.

Perhaps more importantly, Omicron could impact energy prices: If restrictions return and [people travel less](#), the lowered energy demand would mean prices ease, and that would help bring inflation back down.

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HEADLINE	01/02 Omicron surge different—and dangerous
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/02/health/us-coronavirus-sunday/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)The US kicked off 2022 amid a massive Covid-19 case spike -- driven by the highly contagious Omicron variant -- that some experts warn will be different than any other time in the pandemic.</p> <p>"What we have to understand is that our health system is at a very different place than we were in previous surges," professor of emergency medicine Dr. Esther Choo told CNN on Saturday. "We have extremely high numbers of just lost health care workers, we've lost at least 20% of our health care workforce, probably more."</p>

"This strain is so infectious," Choo added, "that I think all of us know many, many colleagues who are currently infected or have symptoms and are under quarantine."

The high number of health care [staff](#) out with the virus will also have an impact on Americans' doctors appointments and could make for [dangerous circumstances when people are hospitalized](#) with Covid-19, Dr. Peter Hotez, dean of Baylor University's National School of Tropical Medicine, said Friday.

"That's a different type of one-two punch: people going into the hospitals ... and all of the health care workers are out of the workforce," he told CNN.

But the latest variant isn't just shrinking health care staff numbers. As the virus spreads like wildfire across American communities, staffing problems are [already altering parts of daily life](#).

Plagued with [staffing issues](#), New York City's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) announced last week several subway lines were suspended.

In Ohio, the mayor of Cincinnati declared a state of emergency due to staffing shortages in the city's fire department following a rise in Covid-19 infections, saying in the declaration that if the problem goes unaddressed, it would "substantially undermine" first responders' readiness levels.

And in the middle of a busy holiday season, [thousands of flights have been canceled](#) or delayed as staff and crew call out sick.

"We're seeing a surge in patients again, unprecedented in this pandemic," Dr. James Phillips, chief of disaster medicine at George Washington University Hospital, warned on Saturday. "What's coming for the rest of the country could be very serious and they need to be prepared."

Vast majority of patients still the unvaccinated, expert says

health care workers on the front lines of the pandemic say [that unvaccinated Americans](#) continue to drive Covid-19 hospitalizations in the latest surge, much like the summer surge, when [the Delta variant](#) was ravaging parts of the country.

Despite a year of calls from public health experts [to get vaccinated](#) -- and now [boosted](#) -- only about 62% of the US population is fully vaccinated, according to [data](#) from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

And about 33.4% of those who are fully vaccinated have received their booster doses, the data shows.

"If you're unvaccinated, that's the group still at highest risk," Dr. William Schaffner, a professor at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, told CNN Saturday. "The adults that are being admitted to my institution, the vast majority continue to be unvaccinated."

Dr. Catherine O'Neal, the chief medical officer at Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, said their facility has seen hospital admissions and emergency department visits triple in the past week.

"What we're seeing is that... our vaccinated patients aren't getting sick and our frail, multiple co-morbidities vaccinated patients do need admission, but their admissions are shorter and they're able to leave the hospital after several days," O'Neal said. "Our unvaccinated patients are the sickest patients, they're the patients most likely to be on the ventilator."

The hospital is stretched so thin by the surging numbers, they're concerned they may not be able to "take care of patients the way we want to take care of them by tomorrow," O'Neal added.

"We're running out of tests, we're running out of room, we're inundated in the ER," she added.

HEADLINE	12/31 Omicron dampens New Year festivities
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/gloomy-new-year-covid-19-crashes-party-again-2021-12-31/
GIST	<p>Jan 1 (Reuters) - The Omicron coronavirus variant dampened New Year festivities around much of the world, with Paris cancelling its fireworks show, London relegating its to television, and New York City scaling down its famous ball drop celebration in Times Square.</p> <p>The illuminated ball made of Waterford crystal panels slid down its pole at the midnight hour in Times Square, but only 15,000 spectators were allowed into the official viewing area instead of the usual 58,000.</p> <p>A year ago, the newly available vaccine offered hope that the COVID-19 pandemic may be under control by the start of 2022. Instead, the sudden arrival of Omicron has brought a surge in coronavirus cases across the globe.</p> <p>Worldwide infections hit a record high over the past seven-day period, with an average of just over a million cases detected a day between Dec. 24 and 30, up some 100,000 on the previous peak posted on Wednesday, according to Reuters data. Deaths, however, have not risen in kind, bringing hope the new variant is less lethal.</p> <p>New York City reported a record 44,000 cases on Wednesday and another 43,000 on Thursday, leading some critics to question whether the celebrations should go ahead at all.</p> <p>But officials decided an outdoor party of vaccinated, masked and socially distant revellers was safe, and a better option than the virtually vacant celebration that rung in 2021.</p> <p>"I would be lying if I said I'm not concerned," said Sue Park, a Columbia University student who was one of the 15,000 allowed to watch in person. "Definitely I think it's worth it to come and celebrate. It will just be more meaningful to be in the crowd."</p> <p>Elsewhere around the globe, events were scaled back or cancelled outright, such as with the traditional fireworks over the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur.</p> <p>Midnight passed in Paris without a planned fireworks display or DJ sets, as city officials cancelled events planned on the Champs-Elysees following the advice of a scientific panel that declared mass gatherings would be too risky.</p> <p>In the Netherlands, where outside groupings of more than four people are banned, police dispersed several thousand people who had defiantly gathered at Amsterdam's central Dam Square, ANP news agency reported.</p> <p>But in London, where a fireworks display and light show had been cancelled in October, officials announced on Friday the spectacle would come to life on the television screen, as Big Ben rang in the New Year for the first time since 2017 following a restoration.</p> <p>BBC images of the fireworks showed very light vehicle traffic and virtually no in-person spectators.</p> <p>Earlier, Britain published a study of a million cases that found those with Omicron were around a third as likely to need hospitalisation as those with the previously dominant Delta variant. The results were "in keeping with the encouraging signs we have already seen," said Susan Hopkins, chief medical adviser at the UK Health Security Agency.</p> <p>In the wake of encouraging data, Cape Town abruptly lifted a curfew just in time for the New Year, after South Africa became the first country to declare its Omicron wave had crested - and with no huge surge in deaths.</p>

South Africa had first raised the alarm about the new fast-spreading coronavirus variant racing around the world.

"I'm just hoping that Cape Town goes back to the old Cape Town that we all knew about," said Michael Mchede, manager of a Hard Rock cafe by the white sands of Camps Bay Beach, who was thrilled to get the place ready to host an unexpected bash.

Hours earlier, the Australian city of Sydney also feted the New Year with something like full swagger, as spectacular fireworks glittered in the harbour above the Opera House.

People in Madrid queued for hours to get into the main Puerta del Sol square where celebrations went ahead with multiple security checkpoints, mandatory masks and capacity at 60% of normal levels.

Saul Pedrero, a 34-year old clerk, made the trip from Barcelona, which has some of Spain's strictest controls, including a 1 a.m. curfew.

"It seems like another country. Here you can do everything and nobody says anything," he said.

A lavish firework display lit up the festivities, which Spaniards mark by stuffing 12 grapes into their mouths to accompany each chime of the clock striking midnight.

In Asia, celebrations were mostly abridged or cancelled. In South Korea, a traditional midnight bell-ringing ceremony was cancelled for the second year, while festivities were banned in Tokyo's glittering Shibuya entertainment district, and Prime Minister Fumio Kishida took to YouTube to urge people to wear masks and limit numbers at parties.

China, where the coronavirus first emerged in late 2019, was on high alert, with the city of Xian under lockdown and New Year events in other cities cancelled.

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HEADLINE	01/02 Floods hit Malaysia; thousands evacuated
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/floods-hit-seven-states-malaysia-thousands-more-evacuated-2022-01-02/
GIST	<p>KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 2 (Reuters) - Seven states in Malaysia were hit by floods on Sunday and thousands of people were evacuated, taking the total affected by heavy rain in the last two weeks to over 125,000, the National Disaster Management Agency said.</p> <p>The agency said in a statement that Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang, Johor, Malacca, Negeri Sembilan and Sabah were still affected by floods, and 8,727 people were taking shelter at 128 relief centres.</p> <p>A total of 125,490 people have been affected by the floods nationwide, it said, of which 117,700 evacuees have returned home.</p> <p>Floods are common on the eastern coast of Malaysia during the annual monsoon season between October and March, but unusually heavy rainfall that started on Dec. 17 displaced thousands and strained emergency services.</p> <p>Fifty people have died in the floods, and two remain missing, according to a police tweet citing Inspector-General Acryl Sani Abdullah Sani.</p> <p>Following the meteorological department's warning of continuous heavy rains, the National Disaster Control Centre has issued a disaster operation preparedness notice.</p> <p>The Department of Irrigation and Drainage also issued a warning of high tides between Jan. 2-5, and cautioned residents on the west coast in Peninsula Malaysia, the statement said.</p>

	<p>Malaysia said it will provide 1.4 billion ringgit (\$336.22 million) in cash aid and other forms of relief for those hit by severe flooding this month.</p> <p>It is also seeking \$3 million from the U.N. Green Climate Fund to develop a national plan to adapt to climate change.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/02 India Covid cases rise sharply
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/india/indias-daily-covid-19-cases-rise-by-27553-2022-01-02/
GIST	<p>NEW DELHI, Jan 2 (Reuters) - India reported more than 27,000 new COVID-19 cases on Sunday, with infections sharply rising for a fifth consecutive day, but the chief minister of the capital New Delhi said there was no need to panic, citing low hospitalisation rates.</p> <p>The country's largest cities, including Delhi and the financial capital Mumbai, have seen a recent spike in COVID-19 cases, including those of the Omicron variant, which has triggered a fresh wave of infections in other parts of the world.</p> <p>Although the number of active cases in Delhi has tripled in just the last three days, Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal said that hospitalisations had not gone up.</p> <p>"This means that most people who are coming down with (COVID-19) are not requiring hospital care. They are mild cases," Kejriwal said in an online briefing.</p> <p>"Cases are going up but there is no reason to worry. There is no need to panic," he said.</p> <p>Delhi was among hardest hit cities during the second wave of the pandemic in India last year, with hospitals running out of beds and life-saving oxygen, leaving patients gasping for breath.</p> <p>India has recorded a total of 34.88 million COVID-19 infections, with 27,553 new cases in the last 24 hours, health ministry data showed on Sunday.</p> <p>The country's total death toll stands at 481,770.</p> <p>Local government authorities in Mumbai city said thousands of people were conducting COVID-19 rapid antigen tests at home.</p> <p>"We are noticing that people are self-quarantining if they test positive and at the same time many are also seeking support from the government-run isolation centres if they are finding less space at home to quarantine," said Srikant Deshmukh, a senior health official with Mumbai's municipal commissioner's office.</p> <p>India is set to launch a vaccination drive for children in the age group of 15 to 18 years from Monday and state governments were gearing up to administer doses at schools, hospitals and through special camps.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/02 Daily cases Saudi Arabia, UAE climb
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/daily-covid-cases-saudi-arabia-above-1000-continue-climb-uae-2022-01-02/
GIST	<p>Jan 2 (Reuters) - Daily coronavirus cases in Saudi Arabia have climbed above 1,000 for the first time since August, while daily infections in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have crossed the 2,500-level.</p> <p>Authorities in the two Gulf Arab states did not break down the cases by COVID-19 variant. Both countries confirmed their first known case of the Omicron variant in early December.</p>

	<p>Saudi Arabia, the largest Gulf state with a population of around 30 million, on Sunday registered 1,024 new coronavirus infections and one death. Daily cases had fallen below 100 in September.</p> <p>Neighbouring UAE, a tourism and commercial hub now marking its peak tourism season and hosting a world fair, announced 2,600 new coronavirus cases and three deaths.</p> <p>Daily infections in the UAE rose above 2,000 on Dec. 29, after having fallen below 100 in October.</p> <p>The UAE said on Saturday it would ban non-vaccinated citizens from traveling abroad from Jan. 10 and that fully vaccinated citizens would also require a booster shot to be eligible to travel.</p> <p>The latest daily COVID figures are still below a peak of nearly 4,000 hit in the UAE last January when visitors flocked to the country, and a record of over 4,700 in Saudi Arabia in June 2020, according to Reuters data.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/02 Australia cases dip, hospitalizations rise
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/new-australian-covid-19-cases-dip-hospitalisations-rise-2022-01-02/
GIST	<p>SYDNEY, Jan 2 (Reuters) - New Australian COVID-19 cases dipped on Sunday as testing slowed over a holiday weekend, but remained well over 30,000 and hospitalisations rose further in New South Wales as concerns grow about potential strains on the national health system.</p> <p>Newly diagnosed cases in New South Wales, the most populous state, dropped to 18,278 from 22,577 the day before as the number of tests conducted on New Year's Day dropped by a quarter, health department figures showed.</p> <p>But hospitalisations, which authorities have signalled is a figure they are more closely monitoring than total case numbers as they shift towards living with the virus, jumped by 18% to 1,066.</p> <p>In Victoria, daily case numbers remained above 7,000 and Queensland reported a record 3,587 new cases.</p> <p>"As we enter a new year, we are entering a new battle against COVID-19," Queensland state Treasurer Cameron Dick said.</p> <p>"If we can slow the spread of the virus, that takes the pressure off our health system in particular," Dick said, asking people to get vaccinated and get booster shots, wear masks in indoor settings and work from home if possible.</p> <p>With only Western Australia and the Northern Territory still to report figures on Sunday, the national tally of new cases was more than 32,200, below Saturday's record of 35,327.</p> <p>All Australian states, except for Western Australia, have begun to live with the virus as vaccination levels have risen, and the easing in restrictions has pushed cases higher.</p> <p>There were five deaths reported in New South Wales and Victoria, bringing the national death toll throughout the pandemic to almost 2,260 people.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/02 Dutch police clash w/lockdown protesters
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/dutch-police-disperse-thousands-protesting-against-lockdown-measures-2022-01-02/

GIST	<p>AMSTERDAM, Jan 2 (Reuters) - Riot police with batons and shields tried to break up a crowd of several thousand who had gathered in the Dutch capital on Sunday to protest against COVID-19 lockdown measures and vaccinations.</p> <p>Amsterdam mayor Femke Halsema issued an emergency ordinance, empowering police to clear the central Museum Square, after the protesters violated a ban on holding public gatherings during the latest wave of coronavirus infections.</p> <p>The protesters, who mostly did not wear masks and broke social distancing rules, also ignored an order not to hold a march and walked along a main thoroughfare, playing music and holding yellow umbrellas in a sign of opposition to the government measures.</p> <p>The Netherlands went into a sudden lockdown on Dec. 19, with the government ordering the closure of all but essential stores, as well as restaurants, hairdressers, gyms, museums and other public places until at least Jan. 14.</p> <p>Public gatherings of more than two people are prohibited under the current set of restrictions.</p> <p>Like other European countries, the Netherlands imposed the measures in an effort to prevent a fresh wave of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus that could overwhelm an already strained healthcare system.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/02 Sudan security forces clash w/protesters
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/internet-services-appear-be-disrupted-sudans-capital-reuters-witnesses-2022-01-02/
GIST	<p>KHARTOUM, Jan 2 (Reuters) - Security forces fired tear gas at anti-military protesters in Sudan's capital Khartoum, televised images showed, as demonstrators marched towards the presidential palace in the 12th round of major protests since a coup on Oct. 25.</p> <p>Internet and mobile services appeared to be disrupted in Sudan's capital Khartoum on Sunday ahead of planned protests against military rule, Reuters witnesses said.</p> <p>All bridges directly connecting to Khartoum were also closed, one Reuters witness said.</p> <p>Sunday's protests come after six people died and hundreds were injured in nationwide demonstrations against military rule on Thursday. The death toll since the security forces' crackdown began in October is now 54, the Central Committee of Sudanese Doctors said.</p> <p>The military took power in an Oct. 25 coup that ended a power-sharing deal with civilian political forces. That deal, agreed in 2019, was supposed to pave the way for a transitional government and eventually elections following the overthrow of long-time leader Omar al-Bashir.</p> <p>Protests against military rule have continued even after Abdallah Hamdok was reinstated as prime minister last month.</p> <p>The demonstrators have demanded the military play no role in government during a transition to free elections.</p> <p>Some people managed to post images on social media showing protests in several other cities, including Ad-Damazin and Port Sudan.</p> <p>Al Hadath TV quoted an adviser to military leader Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan as saying the military would not allow anyone to pull the country into chaos and that continued protests were a "physical, psychological, and mental drain on the country" and "would not achieve a political solution."</p>

	<p>On recent occasions when communications have been disrupted, sources at telecoms companies have told Reuters that authorities demanded providers cut their services. Officials could not immediately be reached for comment on Sunday.</p> <p>In a televised speech on Friday, Burhan said disputes over power and the loss of lives meant everyone "should use the voice of reason.</p> <p>"The only way to rule is by popular mandate through elections," Burhan said.</p> <p>Sudan's Sovereign Council, which Burhan leads, on Friday denounced the violence that accompanied Thursday's protests, adding it had ordered authorities to take all legal and military measures to avoid a recurrence and "nobody will go unpunished".</p> <p>Last week, the council reinstated powers of arrest and detention to the intelligence service.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/01 Colleges returning to online classes
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-education-chicago-pandemics-7eac07fbfd7ec0c268618d017838aafb
GIST	<p>With COVID-19 cases surging just as students are about to return from winter break, dozens of U.S. colleges are moving classes online again for at least the first week or so of the semester — and some warn it could stretch longer if the wave of infection doesn't subside soon.</p> <p>Harvard is moving classes online for the first three weeks of the new year, with a return to campus scheduled for late January, "conditions permitting." The University of Chicago is delaying the beginning of its new term and holding the first two weeks online. Some others are inviting students back to campus but starting classes online, including Michigan State University.</p> <p>Many colleges hope that an extra week or two will get them past the peak of the nationwide spike driven by the highly contagious omicron variant. Still, the surge is casting uncertainty over a semester many had hoped would be the closest to normal since the start of the pandemic.</p> <p>For some students, starting the term remotely is becoming routine — many colleges used the strategy last year amid a wave of cases. But some fear the latest shift could extend well beyond a week or two.</p> <p>Jake Maynard, a student at George Washington University in the nation's capital, said he is fine with a week of online classes, but beyond that, he hopes officials trust in the booster shots and provide a traditional college experience.</p> <p>He has already taken a year of online learning, which he said "did not work" and wasn't what he expected from a school that charges more than \$50,000 a year.</p> <p>"I'm a junior, but about half my schooling experience has been online," said Maynard, 20, of Ellicott City, Maryland. "You lose so much of what makes the school the school."</p> <p>The university is inviting students back to campus starting Monday, but classes will be held online until Jan. 18 as officials ramp up virus testing and isolate any infected students. The school has more than doubled its isolation space and moved up the deadline for a new booster shot requirement by three weeks because of omicron.</p> <p>"The omicron variant hit us at a terrible time, basically the last couple weeks of the fall semester, which doesn't give us much time to prepare for spring," said Dr. Lynn Goldman, dean of George Washington's school of public health.</p>

The university was among many that saw infections soar in the days before winter break. The campus averaged more than 80 cases a day during finals week, compared with just a few a day for much of the fall. And while most recent cases were mild, nearly all were among students who had received at least two doses of a COVID-19 vaccine.

As for the mid-January target date for resuming in-person learning, Goldman said officials “recognize there’s some possibility that it won’t be possible.”

So far, more than 70 colleges across 26 states are starting the term online, and others say they are considering it. Many making the move now use quarter systems that start earlier than those with semesters.

Many of those shifting online are in recent virus hot spots, including George Washington, Yale and Columbia on the East Coast, along with Wayne State University in Detroit and Northwestern University near Chicago. The list also includes most of the University of California campuses and Rice University in Houston.

At the University of California, Riverside, students can return on Monday but face two weeks of online classes. They are also being asked to sequester for five days while they undergo two rounds of virus testing.

It’s the first time since last spring that the school has moved fully remote, but Chancellor Kim Wilcox said it is the best way to prevent the virus from spreading after students return from holiday travel.

“We think about it as rebuilding our bubble,” he said. “It gives us a chance to reset things and then hopefully be off and running.”

Some other colleges are delaying the new term without offering remote classes. Syracuse University pushed its semester back a week, citing projections that the first three weeks of January will be “the most challenging of this surge.”

Others are pressing ahead with in-person learning, saying the health risks are low with masks and booster shots.

At Northeastern University in Boston, one of a growing number of schools requiring boosters, students are returning as planned. Officials said the school is shifting its focus from preventing all cases to warding off serious illness or hospitalization.

“As we move into this endemic phase of the pandemic, our job is to continue to control COVID effectively, not let COVID control us,” Ken Henderson, chancellor and senior vice president for learning, said in a message to the campus.

The move drew praise from Republican Gov. Charlie Baker, who said COVID-19 poses little risk to college students, while “prolonged isolation is a very real risk to their growth and mental health.”

The University of Florida plans to return to in-person learning at the start of the semester, despite a request from a faculty union to teach remotely for the first three weeks.

Paul Ortiz, president of the campus chapter of the United Faculty of Florida, said older faculty members will be at higher risk, especially with no mask or vaccine mandates, which have been outlawed by GOP Gov. Ron DeSantis.

“We do not want our campus to become a super-spreader,” Ortiz said. “There’s just a lot of uncertainty right now, a lot of stress.”

At some colleges starting remotely, officials say they are committed to a quick return to the classroom.

	<p>The 50,000-student campus of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign plans to resume in-person classes after one week of online instruction. Students are being encouraged to return during that first week so they can take two virus tests, which will clear them to resume in-person activities if they test negative.</p> <p>“Every semester we’ve had a spike when students come back,” university spokesperson Robin Kaler said. “We want to make sure we’re on top of that so we can crush it as quickly as possible.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/01 France: fewer cars burn over NYE
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/french-burn-fewer-cars-years-eve-due-pandemic-82031349
GIST	<p>PARIS -- Hundreds of empty, parked cars go up in flames in France each New Year’s Eve, set afire by young revelers, a much lamented tradition that appeared in decline this year, which saw only 874 vehicles burned.</p> <p>The number of cars burned overnight has declined compared to New Year's Eve 2019 when 1,316 vehicles went up in flames, Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said Saturday on Twitter.</p> <p>Fewer arson attacks occurred because of massive police presence on cities’ streets this New Year’s Eve, enforcing law and order and restrictions on public gatherings and wearing face masks as infections driven by the fast-spreading omicron variant surge, he said.</p> <p>There is no information on burned cars last year because of a nation-wide lockdown in 2020 during the coronavirus pandemic.</p> <p>Like many countries, France sees cars set on fire during the year for many reasons, including gangs hiding clues of their crimes and people making false insurance claims.</p> <p>But car-torching took a new step in France when it became a way to mark the arrival of the New Year. The practice reportedly began in earnest among youths - often in poor neighborhoods - in the 1990s in the region around Strasbourg in eastern France.</p> <p>It also became a voice of protest during the fiery unrest by despairing youths from housing projects that swept France in the fall of 2005. At the time, police counted 8,810 vehicles burned in less than three weeks.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/01 Rally Baghdad over US killing Iran general
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/rally-baghdad-anniversary-iran-generals-death-82029969
GIST	<p>BAGHDAD -- Chanting anti-American slogans, hundreds of people rallied in the Iraqi capital Saturday to mark the anniversary of the killing of a powerful Iranian general and a top Iraqi militia leader in a U.S. drone strike.</p> <p>The crowd called for the expulsion of remaining American forces from Iraq during the demonstration commemorating the airstrike at Baghdad airport. The strike killed Gen. Qassim Soleimani, who was the head of Iran’s elite Quds Force, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of Iran-backed militias in Iraq known as the Popular Mobilization Forces.</p> <p>“We will not let you stay after today on in the land of the martyrs,” some of the placards read. American and Israeli flags were strewn on the ground, with people trampling on them.</p> <p>The killing of Soleimani and al-Muhandis at Baghdad’s airport pushed Iran and the United States perilously close to all-out conflict and sparked outrage in Iraq, leading parliament to pass a non-binding resolution days later calling for the expulsion of all foreign troops from Iraq.</p>

	<p>The U.S.-led coalition formally ended it's combat mission supporting Iraqi forces in the ongoing fight against the Islamic State group at the end of December. Some 2,500 troops will remain for the foreseeable future, however, to continue supporting Iraqi forces in an advisory role. Some militia leaders have insisted on the departure of all U.S. troops.</p> <p>"We will not accept anything less than full withdrawal as revenge for the blood of our martyrs," said Hadi al-Ameri, head of an Iran-aligned coalition.</p> <p>Supporters of Iran-aligned Shiite factions were bused in from various Iraqi provinces to the rally in Jadriyah, near the headquarters of the powerful militias.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/31 Germany shuts half nuclear plants
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/germany-shuts-half-remaining-nuclear-plants-82016348
GIST	<p>BERLIN -- Germany on Friday shut down half of the six nuclear plants it still has in operation, a year before the country draws the final curtain on its decades-long use of atomic power.</p> <p>The decision to phase out nuclear power and shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy was first taken by the center-left government of Gerhard Schroeder in 2002. His successor, Angela Merkel, reversed her decision to extend the lifetime of Germany's nuclear plants in the wake of the 2011 Fukushima disaster in Japan and set 2022 as the final deadline for shutting them down.</p> <p>The three reactors now being shuttered were first powered up in the mid-1980s. Together they provided electricity to millions of German households for almost four decades.</p> <p>One of the plants — Brokdorf, located 40 kilometers (25 miles) northwest of Hamburg on the Elbe River — became a particular focus of anti-nuclear protests that were fueled by the 1986 Chernobyl catastrophe in the Soviet Union.</p> <p>The other two plants are Grohnde, 40 kilometers south of Hannover, and Gundremmingen, 80 kilometers (50 miles) west of Munich.</p> <p>Some in Germany have called for the decision on ending the use of nuclear power to be reconsidered because the power plants already in operation produce relatively little carbon dioxide. Advocates of atomic energy argue that it can help Germany meet its climate targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.</p> <p>But the German government said this week that decommissioning all nuclear plants next year and then phasing out the use of coal by 2030 won't affect the country's energy security or its goal of making Europe's biggest economy "climate neutral" by 2045.</p> <p>"By massively increasing renewable energy and accelerating the expansion of the electricity grid we can show that this is possible in Germany," Economy and Climate Minister Robert Habeck said.</p> <p>Renewable energy sources delivered almost 46% of the electricity generated in Germany in 2021. Coal accounted for more than 51%, while nuclear power provided over 13%, according to the Fraunhofer Institute.</p> <p>Several of Germany's neighbors have already ended nuclear power or announced plans to do so, but others are sticking with the technology. This has prompted concerns of a nuclear rift in Europe, with France planning to build new reactors and Germany opting for natural gas as a "bridge" until enough renewable power is available, and both sides arguing their preferred source of energy be classed as sustainable.</p> <p>Germany's remaining three nuclear plants — Emsland, Isar and Neckarwestheim — will be powered down by the end of 2022.</p>

	<p>While some jobs will be lost, utility company RWE said more than two-thirds of the 600 workers at its Gundremmingen nuclear power station will continue to be involved in post-shutdown operations through to the 2030s. Germany's nuclear power companies will receive almost \$3 billion for the early shutdown of their plants.</p> <p>Environment Minister Steffi Lemke has dismissed suggestions that a new generation of nuclear power plants might prompt Germany to change course yet again.</p> <p>"Nuclear power plants remain high-risk facilities that produce highly radioactive atomic waste," she told the Funke media group this week.</p> <p>A final decision has yet to be taken about where to store the most potent nuclear waste produced in German power plants. Experts say some material will remain dangerously radioactive for 35,000 generations.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/31 FAA warns travelers: delays will continue
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/faa-issues-warning-travelers-amid-omicron-surge-delays/story?id=82018872
GIST	<p>The travel chaos continues for an eighth consecutive day Friday, with more than 1,600 U.S. cancellations as of 8:30 p.m. ET. The airlines have been grappling with the one-two punch of bad winter weather and a surge in crew COVID cases that have left them short-staffed, and forced airlines to cancel nearly 10,000 flights since Christmas Eve.</p> <p>Now the Federal Aviation Administration is warning of staffing issues of its own, such as sick air traffic controllers. In addition, the FAA warned on Thursday that weather, holiday traffic and COVID-19 "are likely to result in some travel delays in the coming days."</p> <p>"Like the rest of the U.S. population, an increased number of FAA employees have tested positive for COVID-19," the FAA said in a statement. "To maintain safety, traffic volume at some facilities could be reduced, which might result in delays during busy periods."</p> <p>The travel turbulence couldn't have come at a worse time as millions of Americans travel during what could be the busiest travel period since the start of the pandemic. Roughly 8.5 million fliers are expected to pass through U.S. airports from now until Jan.3, according to estimates from the Transportation Security Administration.</p> <p>Seattle-Tacoma International Airport has been hit particularly hard this week -- holding the No. 1 spot for the most cancellations in the world for three days in a row. Denver International took its place on Friday morning, topping the list with more than 250 cancellations.</p> <p>Carriers are trying to proactively cancel flights to give travelers time to rebook.</p> <p>JetBlue Airways, which has seen sick calls in some departments up 200-300% more than average, canceled more than 1,200 flights over the next few weeks.</p> <p>"We expect the number of COVID cases in the northeast -- where most of our crewmembers are based -- to continue to surge for the next week or two," the airline said in a statement. "This means there is a high likelihood of additional cancellations until case counts start to come down."</p> <p>Delta Air Lines is already planning to cancel 200 to 300 daily flights for the upcoming weekend, citing "increasing winter weather and the omicron variant."</p> <p>Thousands of travelers who have had to call the airlines to change their flights have been met with long wait times.</p>

	<p>Alaska Airlines was reporting hold times of up to 20 hours on Thursday.</p> <p>Delta and JetBlue are quoting hold times of one hour and 35 minutes and two hours and 16 minutes, respectively.</p> <p>On Monday, airlines got their first sign of possible relief when the CDC shortened the isolation period for asymptomatic and fully vaccinated individuals who contract COVID-19 from 10 days to five.</p> <p>United said Friday it would pay pilots triple their salary for picking up extra flights, according to a letter acquired by ABC News. United canceled more than 200 flights on Friday. Spirit Airlines, which had canceled 99 flights as of Friday night, announced it would offer double pay to flight attendants through Jan. 4.</p> <p>JetBlue CEO Robin Hayes told CNBC Thursday that the new guidelines are definitely going to help, but that "the size of the problem really is just the number of people contracting it."</p> <p>"Things are likely to get worse before it gets better," he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/01 Russia-Ukraine conflict link missing bones?
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-ukraine-conflict-lies-in-the-bones-of-an-11th-century-prince-11641052801?mod=hp_lead_pos10
GIST	<p>In the 11th century, a prince called Yaroslav the Wise united principalities lying between the Baltic and Black seas, codifying laws and forming the first political state of the eastern Slavs. Both Russia and Ukraine claim him as a forefather.</p> <p>Now, Ukraine is searching for Yaroslav's missing bones.</p> <p>Finding them would be a notable if symbolic victory, bolstering Ukraine's case for sovereignty at a moment of significant tension with its neighbor. Yaroslav's legacy is contested ground, forming a historical underpinning to Russia's current military buildup near Ukraine that U.S. officials see as a potential prelude to a Russian invasion.</p> <p>Russia and Ukraine each claim to be the political heir of the Kievan Rus federation he founded. Ukraine awards the order of Prince Yaroslav the Wise for service to the state. A Russian frigate carrying his name patrols the Baltic Sea. Yaroslav's image appears on a bank note from each country.</p> <p>For Russian President Vladimir Putin, Kievan Rus is part proof that Russia and Ukraine are "one historical and spiritual space," as he put it in a July essay, and that Ukraine has no basis to exist as a sovereign state. He pointed to their common medieval linguistic roots, a shared Orthodox Christian faith and their rule starting in the ninth century by the Rurikid dynasty, of which Yaroslav was a part.</p> <p>A few months before his essay appeared, Mr. Putin began and then halted a troop buildup near Ukraine. In the fall, he authorized new mobilizations along the Ukrainian border that have continued in recent weeks.</p> <p>For Ukraine, Yaroslav's name has been invoked in an independence day speech by President Volodymyr Zelensky. The Ukrainian government has searched for Yaroslav's remains as a tangible sign of nationhood, pursuing leads across Europe to America.</p> <p>Ukrainian officials have plumbed German war archives and traveled to New York in their quest. Department of Homeland Security agents joined the effort, searching a Russian Orthodox church in Brooklyn.</p> <p>"As direct descendants of ancient Rus, we don't deny the right of modern Belarus and Russia to honor their historic ties to it as well," said Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba. "What we categorically</p>

oppose is current Russian attempts to instrumentalize the history of Rus in order to serve modern Putinist myths and illegitimate territorial claims.”

A Kremlin spokesman didn’t respond to a request for comment, nor did the government-backed Institute of Russian History.

Shocking Find

As grand prince of Kiev, also known as Kyiv, Yaroslav handed down one of the first sets of codified laws in eastern Slavic lands and promoted public education. He traded with France, Norway and Persia. He married his children to Central and Western European courts, including a daughter, Anna, who became the queen of France.

After his passing in 1054, his remains were laid in a carved white-marble sarcophagus in Kyiv’s St. Sophia Cathedral, a church he named and patterned after the colossus in Constantinople, present-day Istanbul.

His Kievan Rus federation declined with the Mongol conquest in the 13th century. Portions of what is now Ukraine were for centuries part of what became the Russian empire. Ukraine declared independence in the chaos of the Russian civil war a century ago, yet then spent decades as part of the Soviet Union. With the Soviet collapse, Ukraine again declared its independence in 1991.

Ukraine’s relationship with Russia has since been a defining issue for many Ukrainians, at times fueling nationalist protest movements.

Nelia Kukovalska, an architect and historian, said she was politically awakened by one such movement. The director general of St. Sophia Cathedral and its surrounding historic buildings, Ms. Kukovalska and her colleagues planned to open the tomb of Yaroslav the Wise in 2009 to study the remains.

They wanted to compare the bones’ DNA to that of known descendants in France, Germany and Hungary, she said, hoping to bolster Ukraine’s claim to a pan-European, rather than a Russian heritage, and stir support across the continent for the country’s independence.

Decades had passed since the sarcophagus of Yaroslav the Wise had been opened. Soviet officials had removed its lid in 1936 to examine its contents and reopened the crypt in 1939. The two skeletons inside, one male, one female, were taken to Leningrad (present-day St. Petersburg), where scientists carbon-dated the bones to the 11th century, according to a 2013 paper published by the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine.

The remains were later returned to Kyiv and placed in storage at St. Sophia, with a plan to display them publicly. The project was later abandoned, and officials reopened the crypt in 1964, reinstalling the bones, according to Ukrainian historical records.

On Sept. 10, 2009, as Ms. Kukovalska watched, a winch lifted the coffin’s two-ton stone cap, releasing a sharp odor. Inside was an oblong wooden box roughly 4 feet long.

At a Kyiv lab, Ms. Kukovalska and her colleagues discovered a nearly complete skeleton inside the box, the remains of a woman presumed to be Ingegerd, Yaroslav’s second wife, which matched the description of the female skeleton taken to Leningrad in 1939. Yaroslav’s remains had vanished.

“I was completely shocked,” Ms. Kukovalska said. “I promised myself I would do everything I could to find out the truth and explain it to all Ukrainians.”

Finding Relics

Sifting through archival records and interviewing Ukrainians abroad, Ms. Kukovalska pieced together a narrative that dated to World War II and had been whispered about among some inside the Orthodox church and other Ukrainians displaced by the war.

After Nazi forces occupied Kyiv in September 1941, many Ukrainian Orthodox clergy in exile from the Soviet regime returned. Two years later, as Soviet tanks approached from the east, the clergy fled.

A 1954 Ukrainian-language newsletter Ms. Kukovalska found said that Nazi soldiers had taken Yaroslav the Wise's remains from Kyiv ahead of the Soviet advance. In the newsletter, a senior prelate in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada and a leading church historian wrote that the bones had been bundled with an 11th-century icon of St. Nicholas the Wet, which had hung in St. Sophia Cathedral for nearly a thousand years.

Both items, the article said, were in the possession of a person in New York who claimed they were in good hands.

Another article Ms. Kukovalska turned up in a Ukrainian-American periodical from 1967 also pointed to the U.S. Petro Odarchenko, a linguist and historian who had survived the Nazi occupation of Kyiv, wrote that the senior cleric at St. Sophia under the Nazis had given the bones to a German major, who transported them to Warsaw.

There, Mr. Odarchenko wrote, the officer passed the bones to a Ukrainian priest who later took them to the U.S. "They are believed to be in the possession of Archbishop Palladius to this day," Mr. Odarchenko wrote.

The accounts provided no corroborating evidence, and both authors were long deceased by the time Ms. Kukovalska read their pieces.

A contact of hers in New York identified Palladius, the priest named in Mr. Odarchenko's article, as Father Pallady Rudenko, a Ukrainian church leader who had immigrated to the U.S. after the war.

In 1961 in New York, Father Pallady had led the purchase of an 1899 beaux-arts building in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn that had previously served as a courthouse and bank, turning it into the Holy Trinity Ukrainian Orthodox Church, according to a church periodical.

In the fall of 2010, decades after Father Pallady's death, Ms. Kukovalska traveled to New York and arrived at Holy Trinity, located in the shadow of the Williamsburg Bridge a short walk from Peter Luger Steak House.

Once inside, she recognized an item hanging on a wall, the icon of St. Nicholas the Wet, last seen at St. Sophia in Kyiv during World War II.

Clergy at the Holy Trinity Church, however, stonewalled when asked about Yaroslav's remains, Ms. Kukovalska said. She said that since the Ukrainian president at the time, Viktor Yanukovych, maintained close relations with Moscow, leaders of the New York church may have feared that the remains, if repatriated to Ukraine, would fall into Russian hands.

Father Victor Vronsky, the church's presiding cleric, declined to comment, as did the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the USA, which has authority over the Brooklyn church.

Substantial Risk

After Mr. Yanukovych [fled Ukraine](#) amid political and social unrest in 2014, [Russia annexed Crimea](#) and fomented rebellion in the Ukrainian east, and a pro-Western government came to power in Kyiv. The new Ukrainian government lent further impetus to the search for the relics.

The new president, Petro Poroshenko, mounted a case with the Orthodox Christian ecumenical authority in Istanbul to grant the Ukrainian Orthodox Church self-governance, releasing it from centuries of fealty to the Russian Orthodox Church.

Mr. Poroshenko charged his staff with finding and retrieving Yaroslav's remains. "He wanted to get them," said Oleksandr Danylyuk, who served as a deputy head of Mr. Poroshenko's administration.

Ukrainian officials including Ms. Kukovalska contacted Interpol and Federal Bureau of Investigation agents who specialized in crimes concerning artifacts.

In 2016, Mr. Poroshenko's office wrote the Justice Department for assistance, claiming to have evidence that the bones were in possession of the Williamsburg church. It warned of a "substantial risk of a new disappearance of the relics," according to a copy of the letter.

The Ukrainian appeal eventually reached the New York office of the Department of Homeland Security.

On a fall morning in 2017, three DHS agents appeared at a different Brooklyn cathedral, the Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Church, in East New York. They searched the church, rifling through liturgical tomes and a display case containing the purported remains of Herman of Alaska, the Russian Orthodox patron saint of North America, the church's priest said.

The DHS investigators found nothing, an agency spokeswoman said, and the agents declined to open a formal case. She declined to say if investigators searched the Williamsburg church. The FBI and State Department also declined to comment.

Moscow has grown increasingly concerned in recent years that Ukraine is moving closer to the West and beyond Russian influence. Ukraine's current president, Mr. Zelensky, has cracked down on pro-Russian politicians and media, giving the Kremlin less leverage on Ukraine's domestic politics.

Mr. Zelensky has also pressed the search for Yaroslav's bones, with his government keeping in contact with Washington and Ukrainian communities in the U.S. and elsewhere, according to his foreign minister and Ms. Kukovalska.

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HEADLINE	01/02 Chip making industry faces labor shortage
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/chip-makers-contend-for-talent-as-industry-faces-labor-shortage-11641124802?mod=hp_lead_pos4
GIST	<p>The world's largest chip makers are fighting for workers to staff the billion-dollar-plus facilities that they are building around the world to address a global shortage of semiconductors.</p> <p>A dwindling supply of qualified workers has worried semiconductor executives for years. Now that concern has been amplified by a global labor shortage, the pandemic-fueled demand for all things digital and a race between governments to bolster their local chip-manufacturing capabilities, according to industry officials.</p> <p>Many industries are experiencing labor shortages. While chip makers have an advantage because their processes are among the most-automated, the high-tech equipment used at their facilities still requires skilled staff to operate it. The scale of expansion taking place now is creating exceptional demand for personnel, often in niche fields.</p> <p>"We are definitely in a war for talent," said Jim Koonmen, executive vice president at ASML Holding NV, a maker of semiconductor production tools.</p> <p>New chip-making facilities, known as fabrication plants, or "fabs," require thousands of college-educated engineers to operate. Technicians oversee and manage the manufacturing process, while researchers help innovate new types of chips and ways of making them.</p> <p>"This entire semiconductor industry, the skills that need to be grown go anywhere from in the construction industry to support the building of our factories, right up to the most advanced</p>

researcher,” [Intel](#) Corp. Executive Vice President Ann Kelleher, who previously oversaw the company’s manufacturing operations, said at a recent congressional hearing.

Intel has pledged to make more than \$100 billion in [chip-factory investments](#) over the coming years in the U.S. and Europe. [Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing](#) Co. , [Samsung Electronics](#) Co. [and others](#) also have [big expansion plans](#).

In the U.S. alone, around 70,000 to 90,000 workers or more will have to be added by 2025 from 2020 levels to meet the most critical workforce needs for anticipated fab expansion, according to a report by Eightfold.ai, a talent-management company. More-ambitious expansion to make the U.S. independent of foreign supply, which some members of Congress are urging, would raise the figure to 300,000 additional workers, according to the study.

In Taiwan, a global powerhouse in chip making, the recruitment gap is at its highest level in more than six years, according to 104 Job Bank. An August report from the recruiting platform estimated that the average monthly shortfall in semiconductor workers was about 27,700 employees, up 44% from the previous year. Monthly average salaries in chip manufacturing rose to the highest level in over a decade, the report said.

“The talent shortage problem has become even more severe, mainly because of the increase in demand,” said Yao-Wen Chang, dean of National Taiwan University’s College of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, one of Taiwan’s top engineering programs. “I’m not optimistic that we can totally resolve this problem.”

At ASML, Mr. Koonmen said the Dutch company’s staffing needs are expected to increase 10% or more annually over the coming period to keep up with [booming demand for its tools](#) driven by the surge in new chip plants going up around the globe.

To attract staff, Mr. Koonmen said, “We are stepping up our game on a number of fronts,” including bolstering its recruitment function. The company is fine-tuning its search for the right talent, he said, and deepening ties with universities to have a pipeline of graduates. The company needs people with skills that range from optics to software skills to electrical engineering.

[GlobalFoundries](#) Inc. Chief Financial Officer David Reeder said: “The U.S. labor market in my mind is probably for us the most competitive labor market.” He added that it is likely to remain a tight market for several years.

Exacerbating the concern is that interest in chip manufacturing has waned among college graduates in recent years, engineering professors said, since many now prefer to find jobs in software or internet services and are reluctant to pursue doctorate degrees without a substantial salary payoff.

Santosh Kurinec, a professor at the Rochester Institute of Technology, said the number of students enrolled in the school’s undergraduate electrical-engineering program has dwindled steadily, from about 50 in the mid-1980s to about 10 now.

“Some want to go make an app for Google and [Facebook](#) and others,” she said.

In Taiwan, a lack of highly skilled engineers could derail efforts to stay at the forefront of advanced technology as semiconductors become more complex. “We need more doctorate degrees who also participate in the next generation for the semiconductor industry,” said Terry Tsao, global chief marketing officer of the industry association SEMI and president of its Taiwan branch.

In the rush to attract talent, governments might play a critical role. Chip companies in the U.S. have lobbied lawmakers to allow them to hire from overseas as the number of American graduates has dwindled and graduate enrollment has shifted toward foreign students.

	<p>In May, Taiwan passed a law to promote innovation and education in high-tech sectors such as semiconductors, leading several Taiwanese universities to start specialized semiconductor colleges in partnership with companies including TSMC.</p> <p>“I believe industry-academia collaboration can create a foundation for the next 10 years of Taiwan’s semiconductor industry, and hope to attract foreign experts and increase talent circulation,” TSMC Chairman Mark Liu said at a December tech forum in Taipei.</p> <p>Mainland China has launched specialized semiconductor research schools and training centers as part of its push for self-sufficiency in advanced technologies, including chips and artificial intelligence. Twelve Chinese universities have established chip-focused colleges as of December, including the nation’s most prestigious institutions including Peking University and Tsinghua University.</p> <p>Ivan Platonov, research manager at the Beijing-based technology research company EqualOcean, estimates that China’s semiconductor labor force has nearly doubled in the past five years as a result of increased investment in the chip sector. The country, however, was short about 250,000 engineers in 2020, he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/02 Schools press to reopen as Covid surges
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/k-12-schools-press-to-reopen-as-omicron-variant-surges-11641119404?mod=hp_lead_pos3
GIST	<p>K-12 schools around the country are pressing forward with tentative plans to reopen after the holiday break in the midst of a surge in Covid-19 cases. Their biggest challenge: getting enough rapid tests to be able to step up or launch “test-to-stay” strategies.</p> <p>School-district superintendents are weighing how—and when—to reopen, a decision driven partly by the availability of tests. The superintendents have different appetites for risk, and the level of teacher enthusiasm for returning to the classroom varies. Regional surges in pediatric hospitalizations for Covid-19 are contributing to differences across the country.</p> <p>In contrast to 2020, there is much broader support to continue school in-person following the grim record of remote teaching on student mental health and learning loss.</p> <p>“The science is clear. Schools need to be open,” then-New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said at a press briefing last week. “Everyone talks about the needs of our kids. Their health needs, physical health, mental health, nutrition needs, their social development. These are academic needs, schools need to be open.”</p> <p>In addition to vaccines, a strategy called test-to-stay is fueling the hopes of educators that the remainder of this school year will be smoother than last. Instead of quarantining, students exposed to Covid-19 are tested regularly and can remain in school if they are negative. The policy is growing in popularity and has been hailed as effective by researchers.</p> <p>Washington, D.C., and Baltimore are extending winter break by two days to test staff and students before reopening buildings Jan. 5. Chicago is recommending that parents administer rapid tests to their children before returning to school. Nearly 2,200 schools have announced that they will be closed starting Monday, according to Burbio, a Pelham, N.Y., data company that is monitoring K-12 school closures in 5,000 districts across the country.</p> <p>Other systems, such as Seattle Public Schools, are pushing ahead and pledging to stay flexible. Last week the district announced that it had received 60,000 tests. So it canceled classes on Monday to test teachers. Classes will resume Tuesday.</p>

“We recognize students learn best with teachers in the classroom and are planning to keep students and staff in schools,” the district said on its website. “SPS is positioned, however, to transition classrooms (or schools) to remote instruction, if necessary, at some point in January.”

President Biden has pledged to make [500 million Covid-19 tests available](#) to the public free of charge through a website to be launched in January. The timing of the delivery of those tests remains in question. Last week Mr. Biden told a meeting of governors that the federal government [hasn't moved fast enough](#).

Some states' plans have been thwarted by supply-chain disruptions.

Last week Massachusetts education officials pledged to deliver 200,000 at-home rapid antigen Covid-19 tests to school districts across the state to teachers and staff so they can test themselves before returning to school after break. While supply-chain problems delayed delivery of tests, schools were still scheduled to open.

A similar delay happened in Connecticut after Gov. Ned Lamont, a Democrat, announced that the state would distribute three million tests to the public. Then those tests failed to arrive on time.

“I think we got ahead of ourselves,” Mr. Lamont told reporters last week. Some of the tests arrived Friday, Mr. Lamont tweeted.

The latest Covid-19 surge, [fueled by the Omicron variant](#), is so far concentrated in the Northeast. Most concerning to schools is an uptick in pediatric hospital admissions for Covid-19. In New York City, those cases were up fourfold in December. In Washington, D.C., they doubled. Nationwide they are up 66% over the past week, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Those regional surges help explain why hundreds of districts have announced that they will conduct classes remotely through the middle of the month. In Mount Vernon, N.Y., Kenneth R. Hamilton, superintendent of schools, decided to halt classroom instruction through Jan. 18 [after seeing Broadway cancel performances](#) and professional sports leagues postpone some games.

“I have been very reluctant to close schools, but given the current trends in Covid cases, it would be risky not to do so,” wrote Dr. Hamilton before break on the school's website. “Schools will reopen on Tuesday, January 18th, 2022.”

In a sign that the pandemic is heading into a new endemic chapter, Neshaminy School District, outside of Philadelphia, will begin classes immediately after winter break but will discontinue contact tracing “because it's logistically impossible to do so with any reasonable expectation of validity, reliability or fidelity,” Superintendent of Schools Rob McGee wrote on the district website. “I am fairly certain there is something in the following that will upset just about everyone on the Covid Continuum regardless of which side you lean,” Dr. McGee said.

Last week the CDC cut the recommended [number of days people](#) isolate after being infected with Covid-19 to five days from 10. Asymptomatic people may leave isolation after five days and should wear masks around other people for five more days, the CDC said.

That shift comports with the test-to-stay model [endorsed by the CDC](#) in December and has been rolled out in states including Massachusetts and California. But only 13 of the nation's largest 100 districts had a test-to-stay policy in place before schools stopped for break, according to the Center on Reinventing Public Education, a research organization based in Seattle that tracks school responses to Covid-19.

The move to press ahead with in-person schooling in the U.S. largely tracks with what others have done globally.

	<p>Europe started experiencing a surge in the Omicron variant several weeks ago. Authorities in Germany and Austria pledged to keep schools open despite the surge in infections, after facing criticism from experts and parents for closures during the earlier stages of the pandemic.</p> <p>The British government says keeping classrooms open is a priority and is planning for schools to resume normal operation in January. Mass testing, air purifiers and ex-teachers are being deployed to ensure that education isn't compromised by the rapid spread of Omicron in the country.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/01 National parks record-smashing year
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jan/01/national-parks-us-tourism-crowds-busy
GIST	<p>After more than a year of Covid cabin fever, the landscapes of the west called out to cooped up Americans, who arrived in greater numbers than ever before. As a result, 2021 saw bucket-list parks – including Yellowstone, Grand Teton, Zion, Arches, Canyonlands and Glacier – smash their previous visitation records.</p> <p>But the mass exodus into the outdoors has come at a cost. The 1960s-era wastewater system in Yellowstone was pushed to the brink. Arches temporarily closed 120 times because all the parking lots were full. The Grand Canyon struggled to cope with a record number of rescues, and an influx of remote workers have driven rents sky high in gateway towns such as Jackson Hole, Wyoming.</p> <p>Interviews with park supervisors, staff and guests paint a picture of a system under increasing strain and struggling to adapt to this new reality. National parks have become the go-to destination for vacationers craving dazzling sights at a social distance, but the surge has collided with a host of existing problems on public lands, including years of underinvestment.</p> <p>That has left staff overwhelmed and guests frustrated.</p> <p>“The whole country had been pent up and everybody decided to come to the American west at the same time,” says Jason Williams, chair of the Jackson Hole chamber of commerce and owner of a wildlife tour company. “Last summer people were rolling into town without reservations or a plan but they had very high expectations.”</p> <p>Now that the chaotic tourism season is over, park superintendents are taking a deep breath and examining how Covid has changed America’s relationship to the outdoors.</p> <p>The record turnout has been a phenomenon largely affecting parks in the western US, and marks a shift from 2020, where people were more likely to visit parks closer to home. That changed when the relaxing of Covid restrictions made wild, celebrated landscapes more accessible, and park authorities say that will continue.</p> <p>For Chip Jenkins, the superintendent of Grand Teton, which saw a record 3.8 million visitors in 2021, that means balancing the benefits of more people heading outdoors with the logistical challenges of accommodating them.</p> <p>“I am thinking about what this means for 2022 but also for 2042,” says Jenkins. “How are we going to preserve a high-quality visitor experience?”</p> <p>It’s not Disneyland: park staff strained by larger crowds</p> <p>Inspired by well-funded state tourism campaigns and an endless feed of beautiful photos on Instagram, Americans headed to crown jewel parks expecting a picture-postcard experience. But the upbeat marketing pitches glossed over the fact that Covid coincided with a period of chronic underfunding.</p> <p>According to the not-for-profit National Parks Conservation Association, National Park Service staff has shrunk by 14% over the last decade, primarily due to federal funding cuts. Total visitation to all national</p>

park properties has increased by 20% during the same period. Making the situation even more difficult were staff housing restrictions and supply chain problems created by Covid.

While visitors would find the Tetons or Delicate Arch as spectacular as ever, they would also discover there were not enough park employees to shoulder the increased demand for basic services like cleaning bathrooms or answering questions at visitor centers. Tourists in gateway towns also encountered closed restaurants due to lack of staffing, empty store shelves caused by supply chain problems, hotels that were booked out for months, traffic jams and frazzled local residents.

In Yellowstone – where visitation hit 4.4 million in 2021, a million more than in 2020 – the sudden influx created a kind of operational whiplash. “Historically, we had 20 years between each additional million visitors and there was plenty of time to adjust,” says Cam Sholly, Yellowstone’s superintendent. “But getting that increase in just a 12-month period made it hard to react fast enough.”

Sholly says the primary impact of last year’s visitor increase was the extra stress placed on park infrastructure and staff rather than on the wild landscape. “All of a sudden we are having to clean the bathrooms five times a day instead of three,” he says. “And we are needing to empty 2,000 trash cans more often.”

Supply chain problems caused food to run low at even the most highbrow Yellowstone restaurants and hotels. And staffing shortages often left dining rooms without enough servers. Chris Schultz and his wife visited the park’s Old Faithful Inn in late September. Given the hotel’s historic reputation and \$500-a-night price tag, they had high expectations but came away disappointed. “The only thing you could get for breakfast was a cold bagel that was being served out of a cooler,” says Schultz, who lives in Tennessee.

Yellowstone visitor activity traditionally tapers off in the fall when snow arrives, but last year the park set a September visitation record of more than 9,000 people. Park managers say attractions like Old Faithful and Mammoth Hot Springs are now just as packed in the fall as they are during summer.

“Yellowstone reached the point several years ago where there are more visitors inside the park than there are services to accommodate them,” says Mike Keller, general manager for Yellowstone National Park Lodges. But Keller, who has worked at Yellowstone for 30 years, does not think adding more hotel rooms or camp grounds is going to solve the problem. He is more interested in educating new park visitors about how Yellowstone’s rustic atmosphere is very different from places like Disneyland – and he wants it to stay that way.

“I saw more visitors come to Yellowstone who were unprepared for what the park experience is like,” he says. “We have never had TVs or swimming pools in our hotels. But there were so many times when guests would complain about it to our employees, saying they didn’t know what to do with their family at night. There was a real fatigue for staff caused by visitors wanting services that we don’t offer.”

Danger for visitors who are ‘underestimating the challenges’

Park staff say a lack of preparedness, particularly among newcomers who may underestimate the extremes of these wild places, has driven up search and rescue costs and monopolized ranger time.

In Grand Canyon national park, the strain of backcountry rescues has become especially acute. Though visitation decreased in 2021 due to a drop in international tourism, park rescues increased by 30% compared with the annual average. The park carried out at least 400 backcountry evacuations in 2021, the most in its history.

The park informs people about the challenges of hiking in the canyon, where temperatures routinely climb into the triple digits and trails are relentlessly steep, but Grand Canyon superintendent Ed Keable says many of last year’s first-time visitors to the park did not heed those warnings.

“They were underestimating the challenge and overestimating their physical abilities,” says Keable. “They were just so eager to get out and hike but they were not as fit as they had been before the pandemic.”

While the rescue data from Grand Canyon and other parks show that the new visitors are often lacking in preparation or a sense of caution, they also share other characteristics, according to a recent study conducted by social scientists at the University of Montana, Penn State and the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics. The study surveyed nearly 5,000 adults across the United States during May and June 2021 to find out who was recreating outdoors during Covid. The results revealed a fairly homogeneous group: people who are predominantly white, middle aged and have slightly higher than average disposable incomes.

“It turns out the new outdoor recreationists are not very different demographically from the existing recreationists,” says Peter Newman, a co-author of the study and a professor with Penn State’s department of recreation, park and tourism management. The survey found that 76% of the outdoor recreation newcomers were white; 73% of people who had been going outdoors before Covid were white. Meanwhile, people who had been recreating outdoors but dropped that activity during Covid were predominantly people of color and lower income.

These demographics mirror a longstanding lack of diversity among national park visitors. According to a 2015 National Park Service report, only 20% of domestic national park visitors were people of color despite the fact they make up 40% of the US population.

“The new visitors going to parks during the pandemic were people who had fewer constraints economically and more flexibility related to work,” adds Rice.

Squeezing out locals

Remote working has played a large role in bringing more people into gateway communities that surround national parks. Outdoor recreationists and wealthy families fleeing cities during the pandemic for scenic rural communities have sent rents spiking in destinations such as Jackson Hole, Wyoming, which is just outside Grand Teton and is near Yellowstone.

Residents in Jackson Hole say that many of the houses in the 10,000 population town that had been rentals for service industry workers and ski bums have been bought to be torn down for new construction. The average price of a house in Jackson Hole is \$2.5m, more than double what it was a decade ago, and rent for housing set aside for service industry workers over the summer started at \$3,000 a month for a 400 sq ft apartment.

The result is an inflated housing market that’s priced out longtime residents. “Tourism drives interest in Jackson Hole, and that interest drives real estate investment, which then raises the cost of living and changes the labor market entirely,” says Chris Dickey, who has lived in Jackson Hole for 17 years and owns a digital marketing agency. “People visit the area a few times and then decide they want to move here. There are plenty of people out there willing to pay \$3m to \$5m for a home in Jackson Hole, but the problem is that’s not a price locals can afford.”

Dickey has observed that many new residents in Jackson Hole come from urban centers like San Francisco and New York City. They are tech executives, finance industry professionals and successful entrepreneurs.

Dickey acknowledges that park visitors are an essential part of the thriving Jackson Hole economy but all the attention can also pose an existential threat. “The real problem is not the crowds or traffic but the loss of our community because no one can afford to live here any more,” he says. “That is the true cost of tourism.”

Park leaders are hopeful that a watershed of new federal funding set aside for parks will at least begin to tackle some of these challenges. Joe Biden’s infrastructure bill includes \$1.7bn for roads, bridges and other improvements inside national parks, while a bill currently under consideration in Congress contains a proposed \$2.93m for National Park Service operations that would facilitate hiring more than 1,000 additional Park Service rangers and other employees, as well as funding for diversity and inclusion programs.

“The politicians in DC now know the public really loves these places and wants more investment in them,” says Kristen Brengel, senior vice-president of government affairs for the National Parks Conservation Association.

As for managing crowding, parks that experienced the most congestion during Covid are looking at ways to require online reservations before arriving. Arches national park is implementing a timed entry system, while Zion will soon require permits for its popular day hike to Angels Landing. Online entry reservations that were implemented during 2020 at Rocky Mountain and Yosemite national parks as Covid precautions will probably stay in place.

But national park advocates and managers worry that these systems could further alienate the people who are not visiting America’s crown jewels.

“What park managers are doing to control impacts from increased visitation could make the parks less accessible to people of color or lower income,” says William Rice, a professor of outdoor recreation and wildland management at the University of Montana and a co-author of the study on Covid-era park visitation. Rice points out that problems with internet speeds, digital literacy and knowledge about new requirements can pose additional barriers for certain groups. For example, the primary National Park Service reservation site, Recreation.gov, is only in English.

“Our research serves as a note of caution to land managers and the tourism community at large,” he says. “Covid had negative impacts on efforts to create a more inclusive outdoors. We need to figure out how to distribute our nation’s recreation resources more equitably.”

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HEADLINE	01/01 Kentucky declares a state of emergency
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/02/kentucky-state-of-emergency-declared-as-state-battered-by-powerful-storms
GIST	<p>Just three weeks after deadly tornadoes tore a path of destruction through Kentucky, a state of emergency has again been declared after powerful storms caused flash flooding, power outages and property damage, including from a possible tornado in Hopkinsville.</p> <p>There were no immediate reports of injuries or deaths, but governor Andy Beshear declared the state of emergency on Saturday, with much of Kentucky and West Virginia under a flood warning. Portions of eastern Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama were under a tornado watch.</p> <p>The storms come as the state was still recovering from tornadoes that tore through the region in December, killing more than 90 people in five states, including 77 in Kentucky.</p> <p>The Kentucky governor’s office reported flash flooding had caused water rescues and many road closures in the southern and central portions of the state.</p> <p>Heavy rains were expected to continue throughout the day in much of Kentucky, followed by a cold front, which could complicate emergency response efforts.</p> <p>In the south-western Kentucky town of Hopkinsville, several downtown businesses were damaged by a possible tornado. WTVF-TV reported a Family Dollar store had been largely destroyed and the roof of a Marathon gas station had blown into a park across the street. Other nearby buildings had roof damage and there were many downed power lines, the station reported.</p> <p>Another possible tornado touchdown occurred in Taylor county, in the middle of the state, where a number of homes were damaged, according to the governor’s office.</p>

	“It is devastating that we are once again experiencing severe weather just weeks after the deadly tornadoes hit western Kentucky. Sadly, some counties have been affected by both of these events,” Beshear said in a statement.
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HEADLINE	01/01 Experts question virus case count approach
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/01/us-covid-case-counts-omicron
GIST	<p>Some US infectious disease experts and public health officials are questioning whether to continue using the number of coronavirus cases as a metric for determining which mitigation efforts are appropriate, as data suggests Omicron is less severe but much more contagious than previous variants.</p> <p>Those experts argue that the US has reached a stage in the pandemic where reports of dramatic surges in case counts prompt unnecessary worries and that government officials and the public should instead review death and hospitalization data when considering precautions.</p> <p>Case counts “are causing a lot of panic and fear, but they don’t reflect what they used to, which was that hospitalizations would track with cases”, said Dr Monica Gandhi, an infectious disease specialist and professor of medicine at University of California, San Francisco.</p> <p>However, other infectious disease experts say that while they are encouraged by data from South Africa showing that its recent Omicron wave was not accompanied by a significant increase in deaths, the virus continues to strain hospitals in the US, therefore the number of Covid cases remains a vital measurement.</p> <p>The US on Thursday had more than 580,000 new Covid cases, the second time this week that the country has broken its record for daily Covid cases, according to New York Times data. But over the past two weeks, while the number of Covid cases in the United States has increased by 181%, the number of hospitalizations has increased by 19% and the number of deaths has decreased by 5%.</p> <p>“It seems to be less virulent for two reasons,” said Gandhi. “One, we seem to have so much more immunity in December 2021” than during previous waves, and “there are now five laboratory studies that show that it doesn’t seem to infect lungs very well”.</p> <p>In reporting data on Covid, health departments should now take the same approach as they do with influenza, Gandhi said. That means releasing hospitalization and death data but not numbers concerning case counts because, like with the flu, it’s not possible to eliminate the virus, therefore we should only focus on its severity, she said.</p> <p>“Once you have accepted the virus is endemic, just like influenza, then you never track cases because we never screen like this for any other viruses, we track what is causing disease and getting people hospitalized,” Gandhi said.</p> <p>Other countries are now implementing an approach that is not focused on case counts. For example, in Canada, which has also seen record numbers of Covid cases recently, Dr Robert Strang, Nova Scotia’s chief medical officer of health, said at a news conference Thursday that the government agency would no longer focus on daily case counts.</p> <p>“We no longer need to identify and have public health manage every single case of the variant because for most people, that will result in relatively mild illness, so we need to focus our efforts and resources on our most vulnerable groups,” said Strang. “Omicron is all around us and we have to recognize that you could be exposed anywhere ... It’s about managing and slowing down the spread but not eliminating it.”</p> <p>The Philippines government also announced this week that it would stop posting case updates on social media, which was similar to an approach employed by Singapore, according to Hawaii Public Radio.</p>

But in the US, there are parts of the country where hospitals remains overwhelmed, largely because of unvaccinated patients with Covid. In Maryland, for example, which saw a more than 500% increase in Covid cases and 50% increase in hospitalizations, at least six hospitals have implemented crisis-mode standards of care, [according](#) to the Baltimore Sun.

At Johns Hopkins Bayview medical center, which saw a 360% [increase](#) in patients hospitalized with Covid in December, that means rescheduling elective surgical procedures and opening additional space to treat Covid patients.

Justin Lessler, an epidemiology professor at the University of North Carolina, still sees case counts as an “important leading indicator”, he said. “With Omicron surges are so big, even if it’s on average ... much less severe than previous variants, the sheer number of cases is such that hospital systems are going to be overwhelmed and there is risks to individuals because it’s so likely you will be infected.”

Mara Aspinall, a biomedical diagnostics professor at Arizona State University, also said case count data remains important because it prevents the public from overreacting or underreacting to the pandemic.

“The challenge we have had this whole time is finding that balance between keeping our physical health in check, but our mental health and the economy moving forward, and it’s all with the best information” that we are able to do that, Aspinall said.

For Gandhi, that balance lies in health departments tracking case counts internally and only alerting the public on hospitalizations and deaths.

“The reason we tracked cases is because we were hoping we could eliminate the virus, but it’s not in the nature of the virus to eliminate it,” said Gandhi. “The country hasn’t totally transitioned to this idea that we can’t eliminate it.”

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HEADLINE	01/01 Teens, young adults behind record cases
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/01/us-omicron-covid-cases-teens-young-adults-children
GIST	<p>As the US is seeing record numbers of daily coronavirus cases driven by the highly transmissible Omicron variant, public health authorities nationwide have said that teens and younger adults are helping fuel this increase.</p> <p>The uptick in Covid-19 among the under-50s coincides with a surge in cases among young children – and a troubling increase in pediatric hospitalizations.</p> <p>The US seven-day average for pediatric hospitalizations increased 58%, to 334, between 21 December and 27 December. The increase in hospitalizations for all age groups was about 19%. Less than 25% of US children are vaccinated, Reuters reported.</p> <p>In Los Angeles county, adults between 18 and 49 accounted for more than 70% of the coronavirus cases recorded between 22 December and 28 December, according to the Los Angeles Times. The case rate per 100,000 people has surged most quickly in that age range.</p> <p>The county saw more than 27,000 new cases on 31 December, dramatically surpassing the winter 2021 daily case average of 16,000. About 25% of all coronaviruses tests in Los Angeles county are positive, according to the newspaper.</p> <p>Broken down further, data show that infection rates in persons from 18 to 29 are more than eight times higher than one month ago. With adults in their 30s and 40s, there are six times as many cases.</p>

“Many of the people in this age group are important members of our labor force ... and these are also folks that are very likely to be out and about for recreation,” Barbara Ferrer, the county’s public health director, was quoted as saying.

“Often this age group doesn’t experience the worst consequences of increased transmission,” Ferrer continued. “And sometimes that’s made it more difficult for individuals to stay attentive to the need to be vigilant about adhering to all of the public health safety measures.”

There are concerns that the US economy and healthcare systems [could suffer](#) further in January not because of imposed restrictions such as lockdowns but because there is so much widespread sickness, including relatively mild cases, that staff shortages further hamper commerce and public services.

Meanwhile, the infection rate for children between ages five and 11 has doubled. In nearby Orange county, California, adults from age 18 to 44 are driving Covid infections, according to the Times’ report.

Coronavirus cases are increasing dramatically among teens and younger adults in southern Nevada. Eighteen to 24-year-olds saw 44.7 cases per 100,000 as of 24 December, an 131% increase from one week prior, the Las Vegas Review-Journal [reported](#).

In Dallas county, Texas, coronavirus cases rose by 76% in one week, according to a 28 December report in [the Dallas Morning News](#). Adults between 18 and 29 comprised almost 25% of these cases.

And in the last week of December, one Michigan hospital system reported a 21% increase in coronavirus cases among 21- to 35-year-olds, compared to the preceding week.

Michigan hospitals have also reported seeing more patients in younger age groups in December, many of whom are unvaccinated, [according to ABC 12 News](#).

“This is also not by coincidence, an age group that remains under-vaccinated in a significant number,” Bob Riney, president of healthcare operations and chief operating officer at Henry Ford [Health](#) System, told ABC 12 News. “The vast majority of the Covid patients in our hospitals are unvaccinated.”

Chicago-area children’s hospitals saw their greatest increase in coronavirus case numbers and hospitalizations this week, according to one report. “We’ve seen our biggest numbers in since the pandemic started actually,” Michael Cappello, vice chairman of Advocate Children’s Hospital, [told NBC 5 Chicago](#).

Allison Bartlett, who teaches about pediatric infectious diseases at the University of Chicago, told the station: “We are seeing twice as many kids in the hospital who are testing positive for Covid than we saw even back in our bad peak in September.”

In New York, the state’s top health official [warned](#) of a “striking increase” in pediatric Covid-19 hospitalizations.

“The risks of Covid-19 for children are real,” said Dr Mary T Bassett, acting state health commissioner. There was a fourfold increase in pediatric Covid-19 hospital admissions from the week of 5 December through the week of 24 December.

As case counts in younger demographics grow, officials are girding for yet another winter surge, though possibly a briefer one than previous surges.

Columbia University researchers have said that the US could hit its case peak by 9 January, at about 2.5m weekly cases. However, they said, that metric could hit as many as 5.4m, the New York Times reported.

The US has seen 54,747,971 Covid-19 cases, and 825,552 deaths, according to [Johns Hopkins University data](#), since the pandemic hit the US almost two years ago.

HEADLINE	12/31 China blasts Walmart, Sam's Club 'stupidity'
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/31/china-blasts-walmart-and-sams-club-over-stupidity-/
GIST	<p>The Chinese government accused Walmart and Sam's Club of caving in to Western pressure after pulling products made in the Xinjiang Province from their shelves.</p> <p>China's anti-graft agency said on Friday that retail giant Walmart Inc., which owns Sam's Club, was engaging in "stupidity and shorted-sightedness" over removing the products.</p> <p>"To take down all products from a region without a valid reason hides an ulterior motive, reveals stupidity and short-sightedness, and will surely have its own bad consequences," said a statement by the Communist Party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection.</p> <p>News that Sam's Club had removed Xinjiang-made items came to light after videos and screenshots from the social media platform Weibo showed products had been removed from the store's online app.</p> <p>The U.S. government has warned retailers and taken action on banning imports from Xinjiang over concerns about the persecution and forced labor of the minority Uyghur population in the far-western Chinese region.</p> <p>President Biden last week signed the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, which authorizes sanctions against companies that facilitate the forced labor of Muslim minority groups, including Uyghurs, in Xinjiang. It also prohibits imports from the region unless the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency determines that no forced labor was used in production. The State Department has labeled China's persecution of the Uyghurs "genocide."</p> <p>Beijing has denied all accusations of forced labor being used in Xinjiang.</p> <p>Chinese media outlets have said Sam's Club customer service representatives said the products were out of stock and not intentionally removed, though the government has accused the retailer of covering up the removal.</p> <p>Neither Walmart nor Sam's Club has made any public statements on the product removal.</p> <p>Walmart Inc. did not immediately respond to a request for comment.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/31 Biden warns Putin to back off on Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/31/biden-warns-putin-severe-sanctions-if-he-doesnt-ba/
GIST	<p>President Biden doubled down on his threat to slap sanctions on Russia if the country doesn't cool its tensions with Ukraine.</p> <p>Mr. Biden told reporters Friday that the U.S. is willing to negotiate with Russian President Vladimir Putin on his concerns about NATO expansion into Eastern Europe, if he agrees to de-escalate tensions with Ukraine. More than 100,000 Russian troops are massed along the Russia-Ukraine border.</p> <p>"I made it clear to President Putin that if he – he makes any more moves and goes into Ukraine, we will have severe sanctions," Mr. Biden said. "We will increase our – our presence in Europe with our NATO allies, and it will have to be a heavy price to pay for it."</p> <p>The president's comments come the day after a 50-minute phone call between him and Mr. Putin in which neither man backed down from the escalating standoff.</p>

Mr. Putin warned the president Thursday in response to his threat of sanctions that the U.S. would be making a “grave error.”

Mr. Putin wants a guarantee that any future expansion of NATO must exclude Ukraine and other former Soviet bloc countries and demands that the bloc remove offensive weaponry from countries near Russia.

“We will not allow our initiatives to be drowned in endless discussions,” Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told the state RIA-Novosti news agency Friday. “If no constructive answer comes in a reasonable time and the West continues its aggressive course, Russia will have to take all necessary measures to maintain a strategic balance and remove unacceptable threats to our security.”

The Biden administration and NATO allies have made clear that the Russian demands are non-starters.

The U.S. and Russia are preparing for a series of high-stakes negotiations in January over Ukraine, NATO and security in Europe.

Mr. Biden’s national security team on Friday were preparing for the first set of talks, set for Jan. 9 and 10, to discuss the Russian troops on the border.

The Geneva talks, which are to be led on the U.S. side by senior State Department officials, are slated to be followed by Russia-NATO council talks and a meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Mr. Biden is scheduled to speak by phone Sunday with Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The two leaders plan to review preparations for the upcoming diplomatic engagements, according to the White House.

Asked if he expects more progress on negotiations after January, Mr. Biden responded with confidence, but not assurance.

“We’ll see,” he said.

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HEADLINE	01/02 Israel retaliates; hits Hamas targets in Gaza
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/02/israel-gaza-strikes-hamas/
GIST	<p>JERUSALEM — The Israeli military struck at least two sites inside the Gaza Strip late Saturday, a limited attack that reportedly caused no injuries but raised concerns that a period of relative quiet following last May’s deadly war between Israel and the Hamas militant group is growing shaky.</p> <p>Israel Defense Forces said that the strikes were in response to two rockets fired from Gaza earlier in the day and that Israeli helicopters, fighter jets and tanks had targeted a rocket manufacturing facility and other military sites. The attack was focused on the area of Khan Younis in the southern part of the enclave, according to sources in Gaza.</p> <p>Forces inside the coastal enclave fired a pair of antiaircraft missiles during the attack, according to reports in Hamas-affiliated media. The IDF reported no injuries or damage to its aircraft.</p> <p>The exchange follows several days of tensions that started when snipers inside of Gaza fired on Israeli contractors doing maintenance on the 65-kilometer border fence surrounding the enclave. One civilian worker was treated for minor injuries from that attack. Israeli tanks fired on Hamas positions in response, causing minor injuries to three, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health.</p> <p>Hamas did not claim responsibility for the shooting and, according to reports in local media, communicated to Egyptian go-betweens that a rogue attacker had pulled the trigger and that Hamas was not seeking to escalate the standoff.</p>

Early on New Year's morning, two rockets were fired from Gaza, traveling over the Mediterranean Sea where they did no damage and caused no air-raid warnings in Israeli communities, although one of the projectiles fell not far from the Tel Aviv coastline. No group claimed responsibility for the launch. One Hamas official said the firings were the result of electronics malfunction caused by a winter storm, according to Palestinian media. Military analysts said Palestinian Islamic Jihad groups not controlled by Hamas may have launched the rockets.

The IDF pinned the blame on Hamas.

"Hamas is responsible and bears the consequences for all activity in and emanating from the Gaza Strip," the military said in statement following the late-night strikes.

The rise in tensions comes as Israel and Hamas are in negotiations, brokered by Egypt, over a lasting peace agreement. But the talks have bogged down over issues that include the return of prisoners and human remains held reportedly held by Hamas and other issues.

As a result, more than seven months after the end of fighting that destroyed buildings and killed more than 260 in Gaza, internationally funded reconstruction plans have yet to be launched in earnest. At least 16 people in Israel died as Hamas fired thousands of rockets into the country.

Military analysts said the sniper attack and the rocket launch may be attempts by Hamas or other Gaza militants to pressure Israel into picking up the pace of rebuilding and easing other constraints on the enclave.

Militants in Gaza also warned they would step up attacks amid reports that a Palestinian prisoner held by Israel was in danger of dying after a prolonged hunger strike. Hisham Abu Hawash was detained more than a year ago on suspicion of being an Islamic Jihad activist, according to Israeli media, but has not been formally charged or tried. He has refused nourishment for almost 20 weeks.

At stake, analysts say, is an unusually long period of relative calm along the Gaza border, where the exchange of rockets and reprisals strikes are a routine part of life for both Gazans and Israelis in surrounding towns.

Since a cease fire ended the war in May, however, almost no attacks have been launched by either side. Military and political leaders have boasted in recent weeks that they have achieved a level of deterrence in Gaza, a claim called into question by the recent exchanges.

"It appears that Israel neglected to inform Gazans of the changes in its talking points," Ha'aretz military analyst Amos Heral wrote Saturday.

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HEADLINE	01/01 Public health system remains fractured
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2022/01/01/covid-what-has-changed/
GIST	<p>Mask mandates. Remote classes. Outdoor dining.</p> <p>As 2022 dawns, it's beginning to look a lot like March 2020 — so much so that President Biden sought to reassure Americans they would not return to those dark days, instead promising a future made safer by vaccines and tests.</p> <p>Those breakthroughs, along with genomic sequencing that can identify new variants and the promise of powerful antiviral pills, represent a revolutionary assault on the coronavirus. But biomedical advances are only half the battle, experts say.</p>

“We have seen it isn’t enough to have testing and vaccines; you have to have a public health system that can deliver testing and vaccines,” said Joshua Sharfstein, vice dean for public health practice and community engagement at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

The country is at a pivotal moment, Sharfstein said, full of opportunity if the lessons of the past two years lead to a new focus on getting shots in arms, swabs up noses and pills into mouths.

But some experts contend that the imbalance between the country’s scientific advances and its public health response is starker than ever, looking back in wonder on spring 2020 when a largely compliant population submitted to wide-ranging restrictions.

“We are going backward,” said Alfred Sommer, an epidemiologist and former dean at Hopkins.

“People are infinitely less responsive now,” said Sommer, who has tackled outbreaks of cholera and smallpox around the world. “This is different from anything that any public health person I know would have predicted in March 2020.”

When the most striking technological achievement of the pandemic — the mRNA vaccines — became available last winter, Sommer and others predicted the pandemic would be brought under control within months.

Instead, a year later, with little more than 60 percent of the U.S. population fully immunized with two mRNA shots or a single dose of the Johnson & Johnson product, the vaccines are providing huge benefits to individuals while failing to fulfill their public health potential of protecting the entire population.

For anybody who trusts science, this is “vastly different than March 2020,” said Francis S. Collins, who in December stepped down as director of the National Institutes of Health, the nation’s medical research agency. But those who don’t trust science and haven’t been vaccinated are in a vulnerable place, he said, endangering everyone around them.

“People should ask themselves which group they want to be in,” Collins said.

In a recent [Washington Post Live interview](#), Collins warned about the dangers of overlooking the lessons of this pandemic. On the research side, he said, scientists are working toward new vaccines and antivirals that will leave Americans less vulnerable to another pathogen that may come our way.

But that half of the equation needs to be matched by improvements on the delivery side, Collins said, by increasing staffing and funding for local health departments, many of which have been running on a shoestring. Officials in some local health departments still transfer data by fax.

There “needs to be a real reset button for the whole system to try to figure out how to be better prepared,” Collins said.

During the past two years, there has been little appetite for organizational overhauls to keep up with the evolving enemy — or prepare for future pandemics — according to Jay A. Winsten, director of strategic media initiatives at Harvard’s T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

The United States has largely relied on legacy public health systems. One example: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s external advisory board, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, typically [makes recommendations](#) for routine vaccines that affect small portions of the population — often children — rather than responding to the minute-by-minute shifts of a worldwide outbreak.

The “processes are designed for a very different moment,” said Ashish K. Jha, a health policy researcher and dean of the Brown University School of Public Health. “They are not functioning well in a pandemic.”

The CDC did not respond to a request for comment.

Those organizational shortcomings are coupled with incomplete and sometimes contradictory messages. There was, for example, the early assertion that the general population would not need to wear masks and, later, a months-long disagreement among federal officials about the importance of booster shots, Winsten recalled.

Officials should speak with greater transparency about what they do and do not know, Winsten said, especially in the face of developments such as omicron, even as scientists [scramble to learn more about that variant](#).

“What’s been missing all along, I think, is a publicly visible contingency-planning process that provides a window into the government thinking and advance planning for a range of possible future scenarios,” Winsten said.

The issue, Winsten said, is that misinformation fills the void, leaving local public health officials reacting on the fly instead of focusing on implementing the innovations that science makes available.

“What we have learned is that science isn’t enough; data isn’t enough; research isn’t enough,” said Jennifer Bacani McKenney, a health official from rural Wilson County, Kan., who has faced growing resistance. “We have learned all the science. How do we reach people is the big part.”

Funding from the Cares Act, the economic stimulus legislation passed in 2020, and other sources of pandemic-related federal support have helped with outreach, but the future of those funds is uncertain.

Nilesh Kalyanaraman, who became health officer in Maryland’s Anne Arundel County a couple of months before the pandemic hit, has seen the benefits of investing in delivery systems. The county has partnered with community organizations to provide health ambassadors who knock on doors in census tracts with the highest rates of infection to educate residents about vaccines and other public health measures.

A successful pilot program that was launched in May allowed the initiative to continue through next July. Kalyanaraman would like to make it permanent, bolstering public health measures for chronic conditions and positioning the country to respond more effectively to omicron or any other variant, by reducing the inequities that have characterized the pandemic.

“The question is funding,” Kalyanaraman said. Public health departments still haven’t fully recovered from the financial collapse of 2008, leaving them in a precarious financial position when the pandemic hit, he said.

“That’s what we are looking at — how to invest in the long term. I don’t have the answer for that,” Kalyanaraman said.

While the pandemic’s first two years raised awareness of public health’s antiquated infrastructure, those systems still had not been adequately revamped in time for omicron, according to Sara Cody, the Santa Clara County, Calif., health officer, who described developing homegrown databases to track cases.

“We are the health department in Silicon Valley, and we still get information about hospitalized cases faxed to us,” she said.

The biggest — and fastest-growing — impediment involves staffing. The politicization of the pandemic has exacted personal and [professional tolls](#), even in Maryland, where elected officials have largely supported public health measures. Kalyanaraman said county health officers have been worn down by threats — and that he has endured verbal attacks in public.

Cody received police protection after a man [was charged](#) with stalking and threatening her.

After a particularly contentious meeting on masks in a school gym, McKenney, the Kansas health officer, was surprised when the sheriff's department offered to escort her, concerned for her safety.

"This is my hometown, wow," McKenney recalled thinking. "I kind of thought I might be shielded from that in my hometown."

Beth A. Resnick, assistant dean for public health practice at the Hopkins School of Public Health, who [testified](#) before Congress in September, said her team of researchers identified at least 1,500 incidents of harassment and violence against public health workers nationally between March 2020 and January 2021. That included sharing private information on the Internet, death threats, protests, intimidation, even shots fired at employees' homes.

By September 2021, Resnick said, more than 300 state and local public health leaders nationally had retired, resigned or been fired.

Complaints include fatigue and frustration with the hobbled infrastructure and the political attacks on public health, which limited emergency powers in some parts of the country, or shifted authority from health departments to elected officials or other entities, such as schools boards.

"They have their hands tied," Resnick said of public health officials.

McKenney said she sees reason for hope — though not in time to respond to the threats a new variant may bring.

She spoke recently at a conference of the Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health, where she was struck by the number of students who came up to ask about her work in public health. Their enthusiasm is reflected by a [40 percent increase in applicants](#) to 2021 graduate-level degree programs compared with March 2020, according to the association.

But turning students' academic aspirations into jobs in local public health departments will depend on sustained funding.

"Everybody gets it. They know that's where the work needs to be done," McKenney said. "The upcoming generation is willing to take on that challenge."

For now, the short-term challenges keep mounting as fresh gaps emerge between biomedical innovations and delivering them to where they are needed.

Shantanu Nundy, a primary care physician who works with low-income populations, has been listening with concern to praise being heaped on the potential benefits of antiviral pills. He anticipates the next problem will be getting pills into mouths. Nundy saw something similar play out with self-administered tests, which he began advocating in March 2020 only to see tests remain difficult to access and often expensive.

The new antiviral medication should be taken within three to five days of onset of symptoms. And it requires a prescription — an almost [insurmountable barrier](#) for the 25 percent of the U.S. population who don't have a primary care physician and others who would have trouble making a prompt appointment, particularly given the wait time for many test results.

"There is an implicit assumption that biomedical innovation will infuse its way into where it's needed. And we absolutely know that's not true," Nundy said.

"Have we not learned anything in the past two years?"

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SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/theater-dance/2022/01/01/theater-of-war-suicide-prevention/
GIST	<p>Introducing a Greek tragedy about a soldier who dies by his own hand is not what you think of as normal duty for one of the military's top brass. But that was the mission of Navy Rear Adm. Frank M. Bradley, commander of U.S. armed forces' Special Operations Command Central in Tampa, who recently spoke to a gathering of servicemen and women watching the session online from around the world.</p> <p>"There's not one of us that hasn't been touched by suicide somewhere in our lives, through our extended families and friends, and as everybody knows, it is a plague that knows no bounds of time or segments of society," Bradley said. "And so, having the opportunity to witness this ... is a great gift."</p> <p>The gift itself was not standard-issue, either. A series of scenes from Sophocles's "Ajax" was performed live on Zoom by Theater of War Productions, a 13-year-old professional troupe that recruits actors — some as renowned as Frances McDormand and Bill Murray — to give voice to ancient texts. The organization seeks to focus these dramas, like healing lamps, on deep societal wounds. Their specialty is age-old plays that speak to wrenching contemporary issues, such as drug addiction, racial injustice, terminal illness and the climate crisis. Or, in the case of the performance for members of the Special Operations Command Central — which goes by the acronym SOCCENT — the aftershocks of combat.</p> <p>A 2021 study by Brown University's Cost of War Project reported that suicides by active-duty personnel and veterans "are reaching new peaks." It found that while 7,057 members of the armed forces were killed in military action since 9/11, more than four times as many active-duty members and veterans — 30,177 — died by suicide. The report noted that the military suicide rates now exceed those for the general population, when historically they had been lower.</p> <p>It was out of concern for this disturbing trend that Bradley, who'd seen other Theater of War productions, brought its work to the attention of Marine Corps Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., commander of the U.S. Central Command. He agreed to a series of online training sessions for chaplains and others in Special Operations intended to propel the issue of suicide more emphatically into the open.</p> <p>"I'm very concerned about the very toxic effects that the battlefield has on people — anybody who tells you it doesn't affect you is wrong. It does affect us all," McKenzie said in an interview. "In the largest sense, Theater of War is a mechanism to provide a venue for people to talk about their experiences."</p> <p>Library bookshelves are loaded with plays about war, but opportunities for serious drama and the modern military to engage with each other remain rare. Bryan Doerries, Theater of War's artistic director, had no models to work with when, motivated by a personal tragedy and the desire to respond meaningfully to the war in Iraq, he formed the classically oriented theater company in 2009 with co-founder Phyllis Kaufman, who was its producing director until 2016. The company grew out of his work earlier in the 2000s, when Doerries, a translator of ancient Greek drama, had begun staging readings of the plays in hospitals and elsewhere, and sensed how rawly and powerfully audiences experienced them.</p> <p>"I began to see that the audience knew more than I did," Doerries recalled, "even though I studied Greek, even though I directed these translations." Having followed news reports about substandard care in veterans hospitals, Doerries turned his attention to military audiences. "It took a year and a half of learning how to talk to people in the military, of making a lot of mistakes, of having doors slammed in my face, of sitting in smoke-filled rooms with veterans," he said.</p> <p>Eventually, he made inroads, persuading organizers of a conference on combat stress among Marines to allow him to stage scenes from "Ajax" — which tells of a great Greek soldier's decision to kill himself after his humiliation at being denied a ceremonial honor. "A discussion we scheduled for 45 minutes lasted 3½ hours, and had to be cut off at midnight," Doerries said. "And every person who stood up quoted lines from the play as if they'd known it their entire lives."</p> <p>Given the profound catharsis a piece of relevant drama can summon, it's surprising more theater isn't devised for those who've been to war. Douglas Taurel, an actor and playwright, has learned this over the past several years, as he's traveled the country with his one-man show, "The American Soldier." Based in part</p>

on the letters of members of the armed forces, Taurel's 90-minute piece weaves together soldiers' stories from the Revolutionary War to the war in Afghanistan. He's performed it in venues as large as the Kennedy Center and as small as community halls.

"I have audiences where the veterans, they like to sit in the front rows, you know, with their arms folded across their chests," Taurel said of their initial skepticism. By the end of his production — performed in front of an American flag, along with a single trunk full of props — he said many of them are in tears and asking why his play isn't better known. "Some even ask me why it isn't on Broadway," Taurel said with a laugh.

Theater of War has a more therapeutic aim. In its military programming, the company, which relies on foundations and other private sources for financial support, has visited bases all over the world. The pandemic, of course, curtailed its mobility and compelled it to shift to virtual presentations, but the move to digital actually expanded the company's audience. "Zoom was another explosion for us," Doerries said, noting that as many as 20,000 viewers in 82 countries have tuned in to a single event.

In November, the Internet provided what Doerries calls his "digital amphitheater" for the 40-minute presentation for SOCCENT of scenes from the Greek play. " 'Ajax,' " he said in his opening remarks, "was written by a general named Sophocles and performed in the 5th century BCE for as many as 17,000 citizen soldiers, who sat shoulder to shoulder in an ancient amphitheater with the generals in the front row."

In the charged aftermath of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, a reckoning with the psychological toll of the country's two-decade involvement offered emotional subtext for the session. To underline the issue of suicide, the actors — Alex Morf as Chorus, Glenn Davis as Ajax and Marjolaine Goldsmith as Ajax's mistress, Tecmessa — played out Sophocles's dramatization of the agonizing final moments of Ajax's life, as the indignity of being refused the armor of his dead friend, Achilles, overwhelms him.

"These are the last words you will hear Ajax speak!" Davis cries, before shrieking out a high-pitched death rattle.

"It's over, friends," Goldsmith's Tecmessa declares, upon discovering Ajax's body. "Everything is lost."

"What is it?" shouts Morf.

"Ajax, impaled on his sword," Tecmessa replies.

"He has killed us with this death!" Morf calls out.

After the reading, service members spoke of the familiar signs of suffering that "Ajax" conjured; of the pain of loved ones, who could not fully grasp what occurs to a human on a battlefield. (To protect the privacy of the participants, a spokesman for SOCCENT asked that the audience members remain anonymous.)

One commenter, though, seemed to speak for many when he gave his own eloquent interpretation of Ajax's pain: "His heart was broken from the beginning," he said of the title character. "And I think the entire play is a cascading effect, that Ajax was slipping on a very slippery slope. At the very end, he slips and it's hard to watch because it's real. It is extremely real and it's uncomfortable. But the fact that it is highly uncomfortable is probably the best thing about it."

McKenzie and Bradley acknowledged the value in exposing military men and women to drama that explores the universality of trauma.

"The military has a very almost antiseptic veneer," Bradley said. "We behave with each other in a calm, cool [way] under stress. But you know, deep down, these people are human."

HEADLINE	12/31 China harvests masses of data West targets
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/china-harvests-masses-of-data-on-western-targets-documents-show/2021/12/31/3981ce9c-538e-11ec-8927-c396fa861a71_story.html
GIST	<p>China is turning a major part of its internal Internet-data surveillance network outward, mining Western social media, including Facebook and Twitter, to equip its government agencies, military and police with information on foreign targets, according to a Washington Post review of hundreds of Chinese bidding documents, contracts and company filings.</p> <p>China maintains a countrywide network of government data surveillance services — called public opinion analysis software — that were developed over the past decade and are used domestically to warn officials of politically sensitive information online.</p> <p>The software primarily targets China’s domestic Internet users and media, but a Post review of bidding documents and contracts for over 300 Chinese government projects since the beginning of 2020 include orders for software designed to collect data on foreign targets from sources such as Twitter, Facebook and other Western social media.</p> <p>The documents, publicly accessible through domestic government bidding platforms, also show that agencies including state media, propaganda departments, police, military and cyber regulators are purchasing new or more sophisticated systems to gather data.</p> <p>These include a \$320,000 Chinese state media software program that mines Twitter and Facebook to create a database of foreign journalists and academics; a \$216,000 Beijing police intelligence program that analyzes Western chatter on Hong Kong and Taiwan; and a cybercenter in Xinjiang, home to most of China’s Uyghur population, that catalogues the mainly Muslim minority group’s language content abroad.</p> <p>“Now we can better understand the underground network of anti-China personnel,” said a Beijing-based analyst who works for a unit reporting to China’s Central Propaganda Department. The person, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss their work, said they were once tasked with producing a data report on how negative content relating to Beijing’s senior leadership is spread on Twitter, including profiles of individual academics, politicians and journalists.</p> <p>These surveillance dragnets are part of a wider drive by Beijing to refine its foreign propaganda efforts through big data and artificial intelligence.</p> <p>They also form a network of warning systems designed to sound real-time alarms for trends that undermine Beijing’s interests.</p> <p>“They are now reorienting part of that effort outward, and I think that’s frankly terrifying, looking at the sheer numbers and sheer scale that this has taken inside China,” said Mareike Ohlberg, a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund who has conducted extensive research on China’s domestic public opinion network.</p> <p>“It really shows that they now feel it’s their responsibility to defend China overseas and fight the public opinion war overseas,” she said.</p> <p>Some of the Chinese government’s budgeting includes buying and maintaining foreign social media accounts on behalf of police and propaganda departments. Yet others describe using the targeted analysis to refine Beijing’s state media coverage abroad.</p> <p>The purchases range in size from small, automated programs to projects costing hundreds of thousands of dollars that are staffed 24 hours a day by teams including English speakers and foreign policy specialists.</p>

The documents describe highly customizable programs that can collect real-time social media data from individual social media users. Some describe tracking broad trends on issues including U.S. elections.

The Post was not able to review data collected by the systems but spoke to four people based in Beijing who are directly involved in government public opinion analysis and described separate software systems that automatically collect and store Facebook and Twitter data in real time on domestic Chinese servers for analysis.

Twitter and Facebook both ban automated collection of data on their services without prior authorization. Twitter's policy also expressly bars developers from gathering data used to infer a user's political affiliation or ethnic and racial origin.

"Our API provides real-time access to public data and Tweets only, not private information. We prohibit use of our API for surveillance purposes, as per our developer policy and terms," said Katie Rosborough, a Twitter spokesperson, referring to the company's Application Programming Interface (API), which allows developers to retrieve public data from the platform among other functions.

Facebook did not respond to requests for comment about whether it is aware of the monitoring or whether several companies, universities and state media firms listed as supplying the software were authorized to collect data on its platform.

China's Foreign Ministry did not respond to a request for comment.

'Public opinion guidance'

China's systems for analyzing domestic public opinion online are a powerful but largely unseen pillar of [President Xi Jinping](#)'s program to modernize China's propaganda apparatus and maintain control over the Internet.

The vast data collection and monitoring efforts give officials insight into public opinion, a challenge in a country that does not hold public elections or permit independent media.

The services also provide increasingly technical surveillance for China's censorship apparatus. And most systems include alarm functions designed to alert officials and police to negative content in real time.

These operations are an important function of what Beijing calls "public opinion guidance work" — a policy of molding public sentiment in favor of the government through [targeted propaganda and censorship](#).

The phrase first came to prominence in policymaking after the 1989 Tiananmen Square pro-democracy demonstrations, when officials began exploring new ways [to preempt popular challenges to the Communist Party's power](#), and has since become integral to the underlying architecture of China's Internet, where users are linked by real name ID, and Internet services are required by law to maintain an internal censorship apparatus.

The exact scope of China's government public opinion monitoring industry is unclear, but there have been some indications about its size in Chinese state media. In 2014, the state-backed newspaper China Daily said more than 2 million people were working as public opinion analysts. In 2018, the People's Daily, another official organ, said the government's online opinion analysis industry was worth "tens of billions of yuan," equivalent to billions of dollars, and was growing at a rate of 50 percent a year.

That surveillance network system is expanding to include foreign social media at a time when global perceptions of Beijing are at their lowest in recent history.

A Pew Research survey released in June showed that perceptions of China among 17 advanced economies had dipped to near historic lows for a second year in a row in the aftermath of the U.S. trade war, the Xinjiang human rights crisis, Hong Kong and the [coronavirus](#) pandemic.

In May this year, Xi called on senior officials to portray a more “trustworthy, lovable and reliable” image of China abroad, calling for the “effective development of international public opinion guidance.”

His comments reflect Beijing’s growing anxieties over how to control China’s image abroad.

“On the back of the Sino-US trade talks and the Hong Kong rioting incident, it’s becoming clearer day by day that the public opinion news war is arduous and necessary,” China Daily said in a July 2020 bidding document for a \$300,000 “foreign personnel analysis platform.”

The invitation to tender lays out specifications for a program that mines Twitter, Facebook and YouTube for data on “well known Western media journalists” and other “key personnel from political, business and media circles.”

“We are competing with the US and Western media, the battle for the right to speak has begun,” it said.

The software should run 24 hours a day, according to the specifications, and map the relationships between target personnel and uncover “factions” between personnel, measuring their “China tendencies” and building an alarm system that automatically flags “false statements and reports on China.”

Warning systems like the one outlined in the China Daily document are described in over 90 percent of tenders that list technical specifications, The Post’s review of the documents show.

Two people who work as analysts in public opinion analysis units contracted by government agencies in Beijing told The Post that they receive automated alarms via SMS, email and on dedicated computer monitors when “sensitive” content was detected. Both of the people spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to foreign media.

“Having responsibility for [the monitoring] is a lot of pressure,” said one of the people. “If we do our work poorly, there are severe repercussions.”

Highly sensitive viral trends online are reported to a 24-hour hotline maintained by the Cybersecurity Administration of China (CAC), the body that oversees the country’s censorship apparatus, the person said of their unit.

The person added that most of the alarms were related to domestic social media but that foreign social media had also been included in the units’ monitoring since the middle of 2019.

The person’s account is supported by four bidding documents for unrelated systems that mention direct hotlines to the CAC.

“In case of major public opinion, directly contact the staff on duty of the CAC by telephone to ensure that notifications are in place through various communication tools,” said one December 2020 tender for a \$236,000 system purchased by the municipal propaganda department in eastern China’s Fuzhou city for monitoring Facebook and Twitter alongside domestic social media.

It specifies that reports to the CAC should include the details of individual social media users.

State media-led data mining

Suppliers of the systems vary. The China Daily awarded its contract to Beijing’s Communications University, one of a half dozen Chinese universities that have launched specialized departments to develop public opinion analysis technology.

However, some of the most prolific public opinion monitoring services are provided to police and government agencies by state media themselves.

The documents provide insight into the scope of foreign social media data collection done by China's major state media outlets, which maintain offices and servers abroad, and their key role in providing Beijing with publicity guidance based on increasingly sophisticated data mining analysis.

The growing clout of Beijing's propaganda efforts abroad, spearheaded by state media, has triggered alarms in Washington.

In 2020, [the State Department reclassified the U.S.-based operations of China's top state media outlets as foreign missions](#), increasing reporting requirements and restricting their visa allocations, angering Beijing.

The People's Daily Online, a unit of the state newspaper the People's Daily, which provides one of the country's largest contract public opinion analysis services, won dozens of projects that include overseas social media data collection services for police, judicial authorities, Communist Party organizations and other clients.

The unit, which recorded \$330 million in operating income in 2020, up 50 percent from 2018, says it serves over 200 government agencies, although it is not clear how many request foreign social media data.

In one tender won by the People's Daily Online, the Beijing Police Intelligence Command Unit purchased a \$30,570 service to trawl foreign social media and produce reports on unspecified "key personnel and organizations," gathering information on their "basic circumstances, background and relationships."

It also calls for weekly data reports on Hong Kong, Taiwan and U.S. relations. Issued shortly before the 2020 U.S. presidential election results were ratified on Jan. 6, it also called for "special reports" on "netizens' main views" related to the election.

"The international balance of power has been profoundly adjusted," said the request for tenders. "Through the collection of public Internet information we can keep a close eye on the international community, analyze sensitivities and hot spots, and maintain the stability of Chinese society."

In an April 2020 article, the chief analyst at the People's Daily Online Public Opinion Data Center, Liao Canliang, laid out the ultimate goal of public opinion analysis.

"The ultimate purpose of analysis and prediction is to guide and intervene in public opinion," Canliang wrote. "... Public data from social network users can be used to analyze the characteristics and preferences of users, and then guide them in a targeted manner."

In the article, Liao points to Cambridge Analytica's impact on the 2016 U.S. election as evidence of social media's ability to mold public opinion.

"The West uses big data to analyze, research and judge public opinion to influence political activities. ... As long as there is a correct grasp on the situation, public opinion can also be guided and interfered with," he wrote.

People's Daily subsidiary Global Times, a firebrand newspaper known for its biting coverage of China's critics, also has a unit gathering foreign social media data for China's Foreign Ministry, Beijing's Foreign Affairs Office and other government agencies.

In late 2019, the Global Times Online won a three-year contract worth \$531,000 to provide a "China-related foreign media and journalist opinion monitoring system" that monitors overseas social media on behalf of China's Foreign Ministry and produces comprehensive regular reports, as well as special briefings in "urgent circumstances."

Documentation accompanying the project says that close to 40 percent of the Global Times monitoring unit's staffers are senior Global Times reporters and that the publication maintains large overseas social media monitoring platforms.

A description on the website of the Global Times's public opinion research center says the group conducts "overseas monitoring and overseas investigation services" and provides "comprehensive response plans" to government and private clients.

Both the People's Daily and the Global Times were among the outlets designated as foreign missions in the United States.

The increase in China's monitoring of foreign public opinion on social media coincides with efforts by Beijing to boost its influence on Twitter and other U.S. social media platforms.

In June 2020, [Twitter suspended 23,000 accounts](#) that it said were linked to the Chinese Communist Party and covertly spreading propaganda to undermine pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong. This month, Twitter said it removed a further 2,048 accounts linked to Beijing and producing coordinated content undermining accusations of rights abuses in Xinjiang.

Experts say those accounts represent a small fraction of China's efforts to boost pro-Beijing messaging on foreign social media.

'Extreme chilling effect'

Just under a third of the public opinion analysis systems reviewed by The Post were procured by Chinese police.

In 14 instances, the analysis systems included a feature requested by the police that would automatically flag "sensitive" content related to Uyghurs and other Chinese ethnic minorities. An additional 12 analysis systems included the police-requested capability of monitoring individual content authors over time.

"It must support information monitoring of overseas social media ... and provide for targeted collection of designated sites and authors," said one invitation to tender released by the Fuzhou city police in October that lists coverage of Facebook and Twitter as a requirement.

The monitoring of social media abroad by local police throughout China could be used in investigating Chinese citizens locally and abroad, as well as in flagging trends that stir domestic dissent, experts say.

"The public security monitoring is very much about stability maintenance, tracking people down and finding people's identity, and when they monitor overseas social media, it's also often with an eye to monitoring what news could cause trouble at home in China," said the German Marshall Fund's Ohlberg.

Companies providing overseas public opinion monitoring to police include a mix of private and state-owned firms, including the People's Daily Online.

Six police contracts awarded since 2020 stated that the People's Daily was chosen to conduct monitoring on the basis of its technical ability to gather data abroad.

"It's the only one in the industry that deploys overseas servers. It is a public opinion service organization that can monitor and collect more than 8,000 overseas media without 'overturning the wall,' " said the Guangdong Police Department in a \$26,200 contract offer posted in July 2020. That refers to the ability of the People's Daily unit to collect overseas data outside China's Great Firewall, a name for the vast legal and technical infrastructure that blocks access to most foreign news outlets and social media within China.

Experts say the increasingly advanced social media surveillance technology available to Chinese police could worsen the targeted harassment of Beijing's critics.

"The Chinese government is one of the worst offenders when it comes to targeting individuals outside of the country," said Adrian Shahbaz, the director for technology and democracy at the think tank Freedom House.

“It has an extreme chilling effect on how Chinese citizens outside of China are using social media tools, because they know that back home, their information is very easily monitored by Chinese authorities,” he said.

The Public Security Bureau, China’s police, did not respond to a request for comment.

A police bureau in southern China’s Nanping city purchased a \$42,000 system that “supports collection, discovery, and warning functions for ... Twitter and Facebook social media data according to different classifications and keyword groups, as well as overseas information lists,” according to bidding documents released in July 2020.

Other procurements for public opinion services outline programs purchased by Chinese police and Xinjiang government bodies to track “sensitive” ethnic language content abroad. (China’s mainly-Muslim Uyghurs are concentrated in Xinjiang.)

A \$43,000 system purchased by police in central China’s Shangnan county included a “foreign sensitive information” collection system that requested Uyghur and Tibetan staff translators, according to the contracts.

Military procurement documents — less detailed than other types — did not offer much detail on the purpose of the foreign data collection but alluded to vague categories of data including “key personnel.”

One heavily redacted June 2020 contract issued by the People’s Liberation Army described a system that would trawl foreign sites and categorize data on the basis of affiliation, geography and country.

Source Data Technology, the Shanghai-based company that won the contract, says on its website that it uses “advanced big data mining and artificial intelligence analysis technology” to cover more than 90 percent of social media in the United States, Europe and China’s neighboring countries.

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HEADLINE	01/01 USDA new bioengineered food rules
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/01/01/usda-bioengineered-food-rules/
GIST	<p>Starting Jan. 1, labels at the grocery store are about to get a makeover on foods that have been genetically modified.</p> <p>The goal was to get rid of the patchwork of different labels for foods and ingredients that have been scientifically tinkered with, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. However, the move also puts a greater burden on consumers to do their homework to understand what the labels mean, food advocates say.</p> <p>Foods that previously were labeled as containing “genetically engineered” (GE) ingredients or “genetically modified organisms” (GMOs) will now be labeled as “bioengineered,” or come with a phone number or QR code guiding consumers to more information online.</p> <p>The changes are part of the USDA’s new rules on controversial modified crops and ingredients. Previous labeling requirements were governed differently on a state-by-state basis. By providing a uniform, national standard for labeling bioengineered foods, “it avoids a patchwork of state labeling regulations,” a USDA spokeswoman said in a statement.</p> <p>The move is universally confounding food safety advocate groups. Eating bioengineered foods poses no risk to human health, according to the National Academy of Sciences and the Food and Drug Administration. However, watchdog organizations say the new rules contain too many loopholes for consumers who want to avoid these foods.</p>

“The worst part of this law is the use of the term ‘bioengineered’ because that’s not a term most consumers are familiar with,” said Gregory Jaffe, director of the project on biotechnology for the nonprofit Center for Science in the Public Interest. He said this choice was in large measure because “GMO” had come to be perceived as pejorative.

Other advocacy groups such as the Center for Food Safety say the rules don’t go far enough and will leave the majority of genetically modified foods unlabeled. And the new rules [discriminate against](#) the more than 100 million Americans who do not have access to smartphones or cell service, because companies will be allowed to rely on smartphone-based scannable QR codes to share information with consumers.

The new rule requires food manufacturers, importers and retailers to disclose information whether foods are bioengineered or use bioengineered ingredients, doing away with well-established terms like “genetically engineered” and “GMO” on labels. However, other kinds of official certifications like USDA Organic and NON-GMO Project Verified will be allowed.

Manufacturers of dietary supplements must also comply, but restaurants and other food service establishments do not have to abide by the new rules.

Food companies say the timing is terrible. Instituting this change in the middle of a pandemic and supply-chain crisis puts an undue burden on an industry already reeling, according to trade groups for food companies and manufacturers. Betsy Booren, a senior vice president for the trade group Consumer Brands Association, said that while the organization supports a uniform framework for the disclosure of modified foods, it has urged government officials to temporarily pause the new rules.

“We believe the government must take a ‘do no harm’ position right now that allows companies to focus on delivering essential products to consumers,” she said.

USDA officials maintain that they designed the standard to balance the need to provide information to consumers with the interest in minimizing costs to companies, while adding that those costs could be passed on to consumers, according to a USDA spokesperson.

Here’s what consumers need to know about the new National Bioengineered Food Disclosure Standard:

What is a bioengineered food?

A “bioengineered” plant or animal has had a new gene inserted into it to give it a useful trait, like making it resistant to a pest or disease, or enhancing its nutritional value. “Contains bioengineered food ingredients” means that at least one ingredient in the food — the soy protein in a plant-based burger, for instance — contains DNA from a new gene.

At this time, only a handful of foods on the market are bioengineered, including some apples, canola, corn, eggplants, papayas, pineapples, potatoes and salmon. Most fruits, vegetables, grains, seeds and beans don’t have a genetically modified version.

What will the disclosure look like on food packages?

Food products will either have a round green label that says “bioengineered” or “derived from bioengineering,” or a label that will list a phone number to call or text for more information, or a QR code that takes you to an online disclosure.

If a food package doesn’t have a QR code or “BE” food label, is it free from genetically modified ingredients?

Not necessarily, and here’s where the loopholes come in, food advocates say. Under the new rule, a food does not contain genetic material if the genetic material is not “detectable.” If one or more of a food’s ingredients comes from a modified plant but the ingredients themselves contain no DNA from that plant, the label may carry a “derived from bioengineering” disclosure. But that’s voluntary. So, starches, oils and sweeteners made from bioengineered plants, but are so highly processed that no DNA remains, may not be labeled.

And the USDA has built in some wiggle room, setting a threshold at 5 percent for the “unintended” presence of genetically engineered ingredients, so highly processed foods made from genetically engineered crops — like sodas, candies and cooking oils — would be exempt from the rules, if they fit under that 5 percent threshold. The European Union’s standard is about five times lower, at 0.9 percent.

“Consumers are left not knowing if it’s not present or if a food company just chose not to disclose,” said Peter Lurie, president of Center for Science in the Public Interest.

Another loophole, Lurie said, is that the new disclosure rules don’t cover products that list meat, poultry or eggs as their first ingredient or their second ingredient after water, stock or broth. This means many prepared foods in the freezer aisle — meat lasagna or chicken burritos — may contain modified ingredients without disclosure.

Is an animal product considered a bioengineered food if the animal ate bioengineered feed?

No. For instance, the milk from a cow that ate bioengineered alfalfa is not considered a bioengineered food.

How do food companies validate their claims about ingredients?

There are three ways for a company to demonstrate to the USDA that modified genetic materials aren’t in their foods. Companies can keep records that show the food comes from a non-bioengineered crop or source; they can keep records verifying the food has been subjected to testing that genetic modification wasn’t detected; or they can keep testing records that confirm the absence of modified genetic material.

How will the new rule be enforced?

The USDA will respond to complaints. There will be no in-store spot checks of food products. Anybody who suspects a violation may have occurred can file a written complaint with the USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service [website](#).

“The already overburdened consumer is going to have to spend four times as much time in the supermarket reading labels,” said Andrew Kimbrell, executive director of the Center for Food Safety. “And now they’ll have to be USDA citizen investigators to make sure this law has some consequences.”

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HEADLINE	01/02 Puerto Rico staggering Covid explosion
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/02/us/coronavirus-puerto-rico.html
GIST	<p>Armed with her vaccine passport and a giddy urge to celebrate the holiday season, Laura Delgado — and 60,000 other people in Puerto Rico — attended a Bad Bunny concert three weeks ago.</p> <p>Three days later, she was sick with Covid-19, one of about 2,000 people who fell ill as a result of the two-day event.</p> <p>“We did so well; we followed the rules,” said Ms. Delgado, a 53-year-old interior designer. “We followed the mask mandate. Our vaccination rate was so high that we let our guard down. The second Christmas came, we were like, ‘We’re going to party!’”</p> <p>The superspreader concert helped usher in an explosion of Covid-19 cases in Puerto Rico, which until then had been celebrating one of the most successful vaccination campaigns in the United States. The concert was one of a series of business events, company holiday parties and family gatherings that fueled a 4,600 percent increase in cases on the island, a surge that public health officials worry could linger into the New Year; the Puerto Rican holiday season stretches to Three Kings Day on Jan. 6.</p> <p>While the Omicron variant has besieged the entire country, it is especially worrisome in Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory already overwhelmed by government bankruptcy, an exodus of health professionals and a</p>

fragile health care system. Officials imposed a new wave of tough restrictions on [travelers](#) and diners in hopes of staving off the new wave of cases.

Rafael Irizarry, a Harvard University statistician who keeps a [dashboard](#) of Puerto Rico Covid-19 data, [tweeted](#) the daunting facts: A third of all coronavirus cases the island has recorded since the start of the pandemic occurred in the past month. The number of cases per 100,000 residents jumped to 225, from three, in three weeks.

In December, the number of hospitalizations doubled — twice.

Without the polarizing politics that have plagued the debate over vaccines in other parts of the country, nearly 85 percent of those in Puerto Rico have received at least one vaccine dose, and about 75 percent have gotten both shots.

But in the face of a highly contagious new variant, a high vaccination rate is not that meaningful anymore, Mr. Irizarry said. Most in Puerto Rico have passed the six-month limit beyond which the vaccine's effectiveness begins to wane, yet at least 40 percent have yet to receive their booster shots, health officials said.

At one point this week, the daily case count had surpassed 11,000, a very high figure for an island with just 3.2 million inhabitants. The exponential increases have begun to taper off, but case numbers are still climbing, Mr. Irizarry said.

"I first noticed something going on on Dec. 13, and I alerted the Department of Health," he said. "By the 14th and 15th, it was obvious. I called the guy who runs the database and said, 'Is there some kind of glitch in the database?'"

There are currently 317 people hospitalized with Covid-19, more than a quarter of whom are children, according to the island's Department of Health. That's about half the number of people who were hospitalized with the illness at this time last year, before so many people were vaccinated. But it is still proving to be a challenge for hospitals.

"The problem is, let's suppose Omicron is half as bad," Mr. Irizarry said. "If you have eight times more cases, the math doesn't work out in your favor."

Gov. Pedro R. Pierluisi has ordered lower capacity limits in restaurants. To attend large public events, people now have to be vaccinated and present a negative Covid-19 test. Passengers arriving on domestic flights must show a negative test taken within 48 hours before arrival, regardless of their vaccination status. Similar rules were already in place for international flights.

Mass public events, including an important celebration to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the island's capital, San Juan, have been canceled. "Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve," which ABC had planned to broadcast live from Puerto Rico in front of big crowds, was downgraded to a virtual event.

After a few dozen Miss World contestants got sick, the pageant finals in Puerto Rico were canceled.

On Thursday, the Scientific Coalition, a group of scientists and health professionals that has been advising the governor, recommended even stricter measures, such as limits on alcohol sales and shorter hours for bars and other establishments. On Friday, the governor followed the recommendation and ordered businesses closed between midnight and 5 a.m. from Jan. 4 until Jan. 18. He also mandated booster shots for restaurant employees and public safety workers.

"It's a message that's hard to digest when two weeks ago the case numbers here were among the lowest in the world," said Daniel Colón-Ramos, a Yale University professor who is president of the coalition.

The measures are particularly hard in Puerto Rico, he said, where it is hard to overstate the importance of a holiday season that starts at Thanksgiving and lasts until Jan. 6. He described it as “Fourth of July plus the Super Bowl.”

“Christmas is a week that Puerto Ricans celebrate their identity,” he said. “They celebrate their family. They celebrate their faith. They celebrate their heritage.”

The average age of people who become infected on the island is 33, health officials said. But experts worry that if young people who become infected while attending parties and other events visit elders for New Year’s and Three Kings Day, the number of sick older people is certain to rise. With so many of its young professionals moving in recent years to Florida, Texas and other states, Puerto Rico has a disproportionately high percentage of older adults, many of whom suffer from diabetes, obesity and other ailments that put them at higher risk for coronavirus complications.

“We have a system health system that is — it’s not a secret — fragile,” said Carlos R. Mellado López, the island’s secretary of health. He urged people not to unnecessarily overwhelm testing centers and insisted that Puerto Rico had the tools necessary, such as monoclonal antibody treatments, to combat the crisis.

But experts also caution that thousands of medical professionals have left Puerto Rico in recent years in search of higher salaries, which could complicate the island’s ability to attend to large numbers of sick people. The number of doctors on the island has dropped by 5,000 since 2006, and another exodus of primary care doctors is anticipated because they were left out of recent tax incentives designed to keep specialists from leaving, said Víctor M. Ramos Otero, president of the Puerto Rico doctors’ association.

“The problem we have is not the beds,” Mr. Ramos said. “The principal issue is the personnel.”

José R. López de Victoria, an epidemiologist who helped design coronavirus protections for Puerto Rican basketball teams, said the crisis was still stretching ahead.

“From what we are seeing at testing sites, this is not over,” he said. “It’s going to be two more weeks. The expectation is that the case rate will go up.”

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HEADLINE	01/01 Stampede Hindu shrine in Kashmir kills 12
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/01/world/asia/hindu-shrine-stampede-kashmir.html
GIST	<p>SRINAGAR, Kashmir — At least 12 people were killed and more than a dozen were injured in a stampede early Saturday near the city of Jammu in the Indian-controlled portion of Kashmir, as thousands of devotees were paying obeisance at a famous Hindu shrine to mark the beginning of the new year.</p> <p>Hundreds of people were packed inside a corridor of the shrine, Mata Vaishno Devi, in the hilly town of Katra, when at about 2:30 a.m. a clash broke out outside, leading to the stampede, police officials said.</p> <p>Dilbag Singh, the top police officer of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, which contains Katra, said that officers had been quick to respond to emergency calls but that the “damage was already done.”</p> <p>One of the devotees at the shrine, Bunt Singh, said he, like thousands of others, had arrived to offer prayers just after midnight, an auspicious time for many Hindus to start the first day of a year. But Mr. Singh, 45, a businessman from neighboring Punjab State, said that the roads leading to the shrine were packed and that there was hardly any space to walk.</p> <p>“A sudden commotion broke out,” he said. “Before the stampede, there was a noise for some time, as if people were fighting with each other.”</p> <p>Deadly stampedes during religious pilgrimages and festivals are common in India, where public safety measures are often flouted by temple authorities. The stampedes are often brought on by overcrowding in</p>

small areas with few exit-control measures in place. In recent years, officials across the country have been trying to improve public safety at temples and shrines, which are visited by hundreds of thousands of people each day. According to local officials, the temple authorities in Katra said they had taken the required safety measures.

In October 2013, at least 115 people died when thousands of religious pilgrims panicked that a narrow bridge they were crossing might be collapsing. About half a million worshippers had flocked that month to a temple in the northern Madhya Pradesh State for a festival. In April 2016, a series of explosions caused by a fireworks display during a religious festival at a temple in the southern Kerala State left 106 dead and hundreds injured.

On Saturday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi used Twitter to express his condolences over the deaths and injuries in Katra, saying he was “extremely saddened by the loss of lives.”

Manoj Sinha, India’s top appointed official in the region, said he had directed officials to investigate the stampede and to look into how such episodes could be avoided in the future.

Videos from Mata Vaishno Devi — which is tucked in a mountain about 5,200 feet above sea level and is visited each year by millions of Hindu pilgrims — showed thousands of people jostling for space near the entrance to the shrine minutes before the stampede. Later videos show ambulances rushing toward the temple and thousands of people trying to leave.

Amit Chowdhary, a businessman from Chandigarh, the capital of Punjab, said he was among about two dozen people who fell as they saw a huge crowd trying to leave through one of the shrine’s gates.

“When I fell, I thought the first day of this year was going to be the last day of my life,” Mr. Chowdhary said. “People were moving over the dead bodies. Somehow I managed to pull myself up and ran for my life.”

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HEADLINE	01/01 Customer rage amid pandemic worsens
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/01/business/customer-service-pandemic-rage.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=Business
GIST	<p>Nerves at the grocery store were already frayed, in the way of these things as the pandemic slouches toward its third year, when the customer arrived. He wanted Cambozola, a type of blue cheese. He had been cooped up for a long time. He scoured the dairy area; nothing. He flagged down an employee who also did not see the cheese. He demanded that she hunt in the back and look it up on the store computer. No luck.</p> <p>And then he lost it, just another out-of-control member of the great chorus of American consumer outrage, 2021 style.</p> <p>“Have you seen a man in his 60s have a full temper tantrum because we don’t have the expensive imported cheese he wants?” said the employee, Anna Luna, who described the mood at the store, in Minnesota, as “angry, confused and fearful.”</p> <p>“You’re looking at someone and thinking, ‘I don’t think this is about the cheese.’”</p> <p>It is a strange, uncertain moment, especially with Omicron tearing through the country. Things feel broken. The pandemic seems like a Möbius strip of bad news. Companies keep postponing back-to-the-office dates. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention keeps changing its rules. Political discord has calcified into political hatred. And when people have to meet each other in transactional settings — in stores, on airplanes, over the phone on customer-service calls — they are, in the words of Ms. Luna, “devolving into children.”</p>

Perhaps you have felt it yourself, your emotions at war with your better nature. A surge of anger when you enter your local pharmacy, suffering from Covid-y symptoms, only to find that it is out of thermometers, never mind antigen tests. A burst of annoyance at the elaborate rules around vaccine cards and IDs at restaurants — rules you yourself agree with! — because you have to wait outside, and it is cold, and you left your wallet in the car.

A feeling of nearly homicidal rage at the credit card company representative who has just informed you that, having failed to correctly answer the security questions, you have been locked out of your own account. (Note to self: Adopting a tone of haughty sarcasm is not a good way to solve this problem.)

“People are just — I hate to say it because there are a lot of really nice people — but when they’re mean, they’re a heck of a lot meaner,” said Sue Miller, who works in a nonprofit trade association in Madison, Wis. “It’s like, instead of saying, ‘This really inconvenienced me,’ they say, ‘What the hell is wrong with you?’ It’s a different scale of mean.”

The meanness of the public has forced many public-facing industries to rethink what used to be an article of faith: that the customer is always right. If employees are now having to take on many unexpected roles — therapist, cop, conflict-resolution negotiator — then workplace managers are acting as security guards and bouncers to protect their employees.

At a specialty grocery store in Traverse City, Mich., a manager named Shea O’Brien was recently accused of being unable to read by a customer enraged that a kind of fish advertised as being discounted had sold out. In another instance, Mr. O’Brien said, a man who did not want to wear a mask verbally assailed another employee, interspersing personal insults with an impromptu soliloquy about liberty and tyranny until the employee began to cry.

“He kept shouting, ‘The governor said we no longer have to wear masks,’” Mr. O’Brien said. The woman’s response — that they were still required in places with a certain number of workers — only made him angrier.

Finally, the owner arrived and “told the customer never to return,” Mr. O’Brien said.

It’s not just your imagination; behavior really is worse. In a study of 1,000 American adults during the pandemic, 48 percent of adults and 55 percent of workers said that in November 2020, they had expected that civility in America would improve after the election.

By August, the expectations of improvement had fallen to 30 percent overall and 37 percent among workers. Overall, only 39 percent of the respondents said they believed that America’s tone was civil. The study also found that people who didn’t have to work with customers were happier than those who did.

“There’s a growing delta between office workers and those that are interacting with consumers,” said Micho Spring, chair of the global corporate practice for the strategic communications company Weber Shandwick, which helped conduct the study.

At the same time, many consumers are rightly aggrieved at what they view as poor service at companies that conduct much of their business online — retailers, cable operators, rental car companies and the like — and that seem almost gleefully interested in preventing customers from talking to actual people.

“The pandemic has given many companies license to reduce their focus on the quality of the experience they’re delivering to the customer,” said Jon Picoult, founder of Watermark Consulting, a customer service advisory firm.

In part, the problem is the disconnect between expectation and reality, said Melissa Swift, U.S. transformation leader at the consulting firm Mercer. Before the pandemic, she said, consumers had been seduced into the idea of the “frictionless economy” — the notion that you could get whatever you wanted, the moment you wanted it.

That is not happening.

“There’s a lack of outlets for people’s anger,” Ms. Swift said. “That waiter, that flight attendant — they become a stand-in for everything coming between what we experience and what we think we are entitled to.”

How do you measure rage? For many years, Scott M. Broetzmann, now president and chief executive of a consulting firm called Customer Care Measurement and Consulting, has been conducting studies of consumer anger. The next iteration is set to come out this spring. He almost can’t believe what he has seen during the pandemic.

“When we founded the study, I never thought that the environment would be like it was today,” he said. “I would never in my wildest dreams have imagined that we would be seeing people fighting on planes and beating each other up.” Last spring, he said, his early-morning flight from Washington to Phoenix was delayed for 45 minutes while a drama over a man and a mask played out in the back. The final scene: The man was escorted off in disgrace.

That seems like child’s play, compared to what else is going on in the skies. In the Covid era, airplanes have become fertile landscapes for fights about rules that are really metaphors for other things. This is where mask mandates meet never-maskers and where weary, combative consumers meet exhausted, fed-up (and increasingly overworked, because so many people are sick) employees.

In 2021, [there were 5,779 reports of unruly passengers on planes](#), more than 4,000 of them related to mask mandates, the Federal Aviation Administration reported. The stories keep coming: of [passengers knocking out flight attendants’ teeth](#); of flight attendants [subduing passengers with duct tape](#); of people brawling about masks, seatbelts, no-alcohol policies, the lack of normal meal service — you name it.

Recently, a woman on a Delta flight from Tampa to Atlanta [hit and spat at another passenger](#) in an incident that began [when she refused to accede to the flight attendant’s request to sit down while the beverage cart](#) was in the aisle. When the woman was invited to find an open seat for a few minutes, she asked, “What am I, Rosa Parks?” according to the ensuing criminal complaint.

Flight attendants say that enforcing rules — not just over masks, but over seatbelts and sitting down during takeoff and landing — is perhaps the most wearying part of their job.

“It’s mentally exhausting to have to police adults over this matter,” wrote Adam Mosley, a 51-year-old flight attendant, responding to a request by The New York Times to describe conditions in the service industry at this odd juncture.

“There is definitely a subset of people that don’t seem to think that any of the rules apply to them,” he said. Recently, an angry woman confronted him and another flight attendant in the galley, backing them into a corner while she argued that she had a right to talk to her children without wearing a mask.

It’s not all grim, he said. Some passengers go out of their way to thank him, just as some customers have taken to leaving huge tips in restaurants. Others have been bringing him and his colleagues little gifts, like chocolate.

“I think there was enough media attention over poorly behaved passengers that some people feel bad,” Mr. Mosley said.

Airplanes are the scenes of the most obvious instances of consumer rage, along with restaurants, where customers regularly express their annoyance at staffing shortages, higher prices, [vaccination mandates](#) and other pandemic-centric problems. But most of the bad consumer behavior is low-grade — a persistent hum of incivility rather than an explosion of violence.

“Customers have been superaggressive and impatient lately,” said Annabelle Cardona, who works in a Lowell, Mass., branch of a national chain of home-improvement stores. Recently, she found herself in a straight-up screaming match with a customer who called her lazy and incompetent after she told him that he needed to measure his windows before she could provide the right size shades.

Such interactions used to make her weep. “But I’ve been calloused by it,” she said. “Now, instead of crying, I’m just really pessimistic and judgmental against the people around me.”

From across the country, workers responded with similar stories: of customers flying off the handle when the products they wanted were unavailable; of customers blaming the store, rather than supply-chain disruptions, for delays; of customers demanding refunds on nonrefundable items; of customers so wound up with worry and anxiety that the smallest thing sends them into a tailspin of hysteria.

In Chicago, a customer service agent for Patagonia described how a young woman became inconsolable when told that her package would be late. Another customer accused him of lying and participating in a scam to defraud customers upon learning that the out-of-stock fleece vest he had back-ordered would be further delayed by supply-chain issues.

In Colorado, Maribeth Ashburn, who works for a jewelry store, said that she was weary of being “the mask police.”

“Customers will scream at you, throw things and walk out of the store,” she said.

The worst, she said, is the political commentary. Once a customer went into a diatribe against Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, saying she had it on good authority that he was about to be jailed for his “crimes.” Others have called Ms. Ashburn a “sheep” and a “fraidy-cat” for wearing a mask.

Her go-to response — looking noncommittal and murmuring “hmm” — seems to make matters worse. “I am very discouraged at the polarization and at the unkind way that people treat each other,” she said.

Ms. Miller, from the Wisconsin trade association, said the pressures of the pandemic and the deterioration of elected officials’ behavior — the shouting, the threats, the hatred — had given normal people license to act out, too. With her customers, she tries to remain calm, address their problems and take solace in whatever crumbs of civility they offer.

“I’m not expecting people to be nice,” she said. “They don’t have to wish me a good day. They can say, ‘Hi, I’d like to buy this,’ and then ‘thank you’ and ‘goodbye.’ I’d be very happy with that.”

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HEADLINE	01/02 Child tax credit ends as Covid surges anew
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/02/business/economy/child-tax-credit.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=US%20Politics%20News
GIST	<p>For millions of American families with children, the 15th of the month took on a special significance in 2021: It was the day they received their monthly child benefit, part of the Biden administration’s response to the pandemic.</p> <p>The payments, which started in July and amounted to hundreds of dollars a month for most families, have helped millions of American families pay for food, rent and child care; kept millions of children out of poverty; and injected billions of dollars into the U.S. economy, according to government data and independent research.</p> <p>Now, the benefit — an expansion of the existing child tax credit — is ending, just as the latest wave of coronavirus cases is keeping people home from work and threatening to set off a new round of furloughs. Economists warn that the one-two punch of expiring aid and rising cases could put a chill on the once red-</p>

hot economic recovery and cause severe hardship for millions of families already living close to the poverty line.

“It’s going to be hard next month, and just thinking about it, it really makes me want to bite my nails to the quick,” said Anna Lara, a mother of two young children in Huntington, W.Va. “Honestly, it’s going to be scary. It’s going to be hard going back to not having it.”

Ms. Lara, 32, lost her job in the pandemic, and with the cost of child care rising, she has not been able to return to work. Her partner kept his job, but the child benefit helped the couple make ends meet at a time of reduced income and rising prices.

“Your children watch you, and if you worry, they catch on to that,” she said. “With that extra cushion, we didn’t have to worry all the time.”

The end of the extra assistance for parents is the latest in a long line of benefits “cliffs” that Americans have encountered as pandemic aid programs have expired. The Paycheck Protection Program, which supported hundreds of thousands of small businesses, ended in March. Expanded unemployment benefits [ended in September](#), and earlier in some states. The federal eviction moratorium expired last summer. The last round of stimulus payments landed in Americans’ bank accounts last spring.

Relative to those programs, the rollback in the child tax credit is small. The Treasury Department paid out about \$80 billion over six months in the form of checks and direct deposits of up to \$300 per child each month. That is far less than the more than \$240 billion in stimulus payments issued on a single day last March.

Unlike most other programs created in response to the pandemic, the child benefit was never intended to be temporary, at least according to many of its backers. [Congress approved it](#) for a single year as part of the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan, but many progressives hoped that the payments, once started, would prove too popular to stop.

That didn’t happen. Polls found the public [roughly divided](#) over whether the program should be extended, with opinions splitting along partisan and generational lines. And the expanded tax credit failed to win over the individual whose opinion mattered most: Senator Joe Manchin III, Democrat of West Virginia, who [cited concerns over the cost and structure of the program](#) in his decision to oppose Mr. Biden’s climate, tax and social policy bill. The bill, known as the Build Back Better Act, cannot proceed in the evenly divided Senate without Mr. Manchin’s support.

To supporters of the child benefit, the failure to extend it is especially frustrating because, according to most analyses, the program itself has been a remarkable success. Researchers at Columbia University estimate that the payments [kept 3.8 million children out of poverty](#) in November, a nearly 30 percent reduction in the child poverty rate. Other studies have found that the benefit [reduced hunger](#), [lowered financial stress](#) among recipients and increased overall consumer spending, especially in rural states that received the most money per capita.

Congress last spring expanded the existing child tax credit in three ways. First, it made the benefit more generous, providing as much as \$3,600 per child, up from \$2,000. Second, it began paying the credit in monthly installments, usually deposited directly into recipients’ bank accounts, turning the once-yearly windfall into something closer to the children’s allowances common in Europe.

Finally, the bill made the full benefit available to millions who had previously been unable to take full advantage of the credit because they earned too little to qualify. Poverty experts say that change, known in tax jargon as “full refundability,” was particularly significant because without it, [a third of children](#) — including half of all Black and Hispanic children, and 70 percent of children being raised by single mothers — did not receive the full credit. Mr. Biden’s plan would have made that provision permanent.

“What we’ve seen with the child tax credit is a policy success story that was unfolding, but it’s a success story that we risk stopping in its tracks just as it was getting started,” said Megan Curran, director of policy at Columbia’s Center on Poverty and Social Policy. “The weight of the evidence is clear here in terms of what the policy is doing. It’s reducing child poverty and food insufficiency.”

But the expanded tax credit doesn’t just go to the poor. Couples earning as much as \$150,000 a year could receive the full \$3,600 benefit — \$3,000 for children 6 and older — and even wealthier families qualify for the original \$2,000 credit. Critics of the policy, including Mr. Manchin, have argued that it makes little sense to provide aid to relatively well-off families. Many supporters of the credit say they’d happily limit its availability to wealthier households in return for maintaining it for poorer ones.

Mr. Manchin has also publicly questioned the wisdom of unconditional cash payments, and has privately voiced concerns that recipients could spend the money on opioids, comments that were first reported by [The Wall Street Journal](#) and confirmed by a person familiar with the discussion. But a survey conducted by the Census Bureau found that most recipients used the money to buy food, clothing or other necessities, and many saved some of the money or paid down debt. Other surveys have found similar results.

For one of Mr. Manchin’s constituents, Ms. Lara, the first monthly check last year arrived at an opportune moment. Her dishwasher had broken days earlier, and the \$550 a month that she and her family received from the federal government meant they could replace it.

Ms. Lara, who has a 6-year-old daughter and a 3-year-old son and whose partner earns about \$40,000 a year, said the family had long lived “right on the edge of need” — not poor, but never able to save enough to withstand more than a modest setback.

The monthly child benefit, she said, let them step a bit further back from the edge. It allowed her to get new shoes and a new car seat for her daughter, stock up on laundry detergent when she found it on sale and fix the brakes on her car.

“None of the dash lights are on, which is amazing,” she said.

Some researchers have questioned the policy’s effectiveness, particularly over the long term. Bruce D. Meyer, an economist at the University of Chicago who studies poverty, said that whatever the merits of direct cash payments at the height of the pandemic-induced disruptions, a permanent policy of providing unconditional cash to parents could have unintended consequences. He and several co-authors recently published a [working paper](#) finding that the child benefit could discourage people from working, in part because it eliminated the work incentives built into the previous version of the tax credit.

“Early on, we just wanted to get cash in people’s hands — we were worried about a recession, we were worried about people being able to pay for their groceries,” Mr. Meyer said. Now, he said, “we certainly should be more focused on the longer-term effects, which include likely larger effects on labor supply.”

Analyses of the data since the new child benefit took effect, however, have found [no evidence](#) that it has done much to discourage people from working, and some researchers say it could actually lead more people to work by making it easier for parents of young children to afford child care.

“There’s every reason to believe that in the current labor market, the child tax credit is work-enabling, and no evidence to the contrary has been presented,” said Samuel Hammond, director of poverty and welfare policy at the Niskanen Center, a research organization in Washington.

Mr. Hammond said the child benefit should also have broader economic benefits. In a [report last summer](#), he estimated that the expansion would increase consumer spending by \$27 billion nationally and create the equivalent of 500,000 full-time jobs. The biggest impact, on a percentage basis, would come in rural, mostly Republican-voting states where families are larger and incomes are lower, on average.

Return to Top	<p>Some Republican critics of the expanded child tax credit, including Senator Roy Blunt of Missouri, have argued that it has essentially done too much to increase spending — that by giving people more money to spend when the supply chain is already strained, the government is contributing to faster inflation.</p> <p>But many economists are skeptical that the tax credit has played much of a role in causing high inflation, in part because it is small compared with both the economy and the earlier rounds of aid distributed during the pandemic.</p> <p>“That’s a noninflationary program,” said Joe Brusuelas, chief economist at the accounting firm RSM. “That’s dedicated toward necessities, not luxuries.”</p> <p>For those receiving the benefit, inflation is an argument for maintaining it. Ms. Lara said she had noticed prices going up for groceries, utilities and especially gas, stretching her budget even thinner.</p> <p>“Right now, both of my vehicles need gas and I can’t put gas in the car,” she said. “But it’s OK, because I’ve got groceries in the house and the kids can play outside.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/02 Large fire South Africa parliament house
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/02/world/africa/south-africa-fire-parliament.html
GIST	<p>CAPE TOWN — A large fire was burning at South Africa’s Houses of Parliament early Sunday morning, sending flames and smoke pouring from rooftops and fire crews racing to save the historic structures.</p> <p>The scale of the destruction was not immediately clear, but officials warned it was likely to be extensive.</p> <p>“The damage will be significant, especially if it’s not contained soon,” JP Smith, Cape Town’s mayoral committee member for safety and security, told the Newzroom Afrika satellite channel. “The fact that they’re calling for more resources to assist is not a good sign.”</p> <p>No injuries were immediately reported.</p> <p>Mr. Smith said the fire was reported just after 5 a.m. It spread from an office space on the third floor of one building toward a gym and to rooftops. The National Assembly building, where the lower house of Parliament meets, was on fire. Smoke was pouring from the main entrance.</p> <p>The complex includes a structure completed in the late 1800s that is home to the National Council of Parliament, the country’s upper house. The National Assembly building is a newer addition.</p> <p>In March, the older building caught fire, but that blaze was quickly extinguished.</p> <p>“It’s tragic that we’re starting the new year on this basis, with a fire in the old assembly that seems to be spreading to the new assembly,” Steven Swart, the chief whip of the African Christian Democratic Party, said on Sunday.</p> <p>The fire was still burning hours after it was first reported. At least six fire trucks and more than 60 firefighters were sent to the scene, Mr. Smith said, and the streets around the complex were closed off.</p> <p>The blaze broke out a day after the funeral of Archbishop Desmond M. Tutu, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate who helped lead the fight against apartheid in South Africa. It was held at St. George’s Cathedral, which is a few minutes’ walk from the Houses of Parliament.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/01 After Colorado fire, snow as new hazard
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/01/us/colorado-fires-snow-boulder-superior-louisville.html

LOUISVILLE, Colo. — Just two days after they fled a firestorm, residents of two Colorado suburbs that had been gutted by flames slogged back home on Saturday through nearly a foot of snow and single-digit temperatures to confront a new list of woes: frozen pipes and water damage, thanks to an abrupt turn in the weather.

The desperately needed snow arrived too late to save 991 homes that were destroyed as a wildfire fueled by hurricane-force wind gusts roared through parched grasses and into suburban cul-de-sacs in the suburbs of Louisville and Superior, just outside the college town of Boulder.

And in a discouraging reversal, law-enforcement officials announced on Saturday that they were now searching for three people feared dead inside their burned-out homes. Immediately after the fire, officials had said there were no reports of deaths. Now, with snow hindering the search efforts, Sheriff Joe Pelle of Boulder County said the county would bring in cadaver-finding dogs to search for victims.

“Potentially there are human remains in those homes,” he said. “It’s not even safe to step into the scene. We don’t know what’s underneath.”

Sheriff Pelle said investigators looking into the cause of the fire had served a search warrant after receiving several tips, but he did not offer any additional details. Officials had first suggested power lines as a potential cause, but on Saturday they said they had determined there were no downed electric lines near the fire’s point of origin.

“If it turns out to be arson or reckless behavior, we’ll take appropriate actions,” the sheriff said.

Family members identified one of the missing people as Nadine Turnbull, 91, telling 9News that a relative had tried to rescue her from her home in Superior only to be turned back by flames engulfing the front and back doors.

As thousands of surviving homes remained without power and gas on Saturday, the seven-degree temperatures and the 10 inches of snow that fell on the Boulder area touched off a frantic new battle against the weather. It came as President Biden approved a disaster declaration for the fire zone, opening up new sources of federal aid.

Residents hiked into their neighborhoods to drain their pipes and empty hot-water tanks. They scrambled to set up space heaters. People on vacation hundreds of miles away pleaded for help in shutting off the water at their homes and opening up their taps to prevent a flood.

Nearly 13,000 households around Boulder were without natural gas on Saturday, and 7,500 households still had no power, according to Xcel Energy, the local provider. The company said that electricity would be restored later on Saturday but that natural gas would take several days.

The Town of Superior said it was shutting off water in the fire zone on Saturday to prevent additional damage.

“This is disappointment on disappointment,” said Alli Bowdey, a nurse whose family fled its Louisville home and was packed into a house with relatives. On top of everything else, her husband tested positive for the coronavirus and was isolating in a hotel on Saturday.

“We just looked at each other in disbelief,” she said.

In the Sans Souci mobile home park, Robert Guokas, 83, was trying to stay warm with a propane heater and warming water on a camp stove as he bundled up in sleeping bags and layers of clothing collected over the years from Army surplus stores. But as much as his long-ago time as a Boy Scout had prepared him for this emergency, he was starting to run low on propane by Saturday.

“That’s going to stretch my limit,” he said, but he worried that leaving for an emergency shelter would be even worse than staying home. By staying put, he could try to minimize the damage, for instance by replacing the pots he had set up to catch the water dripping through his roof after the harsh winds on Thursday tore part of it off.

“You leave it for three or four days or a week, and it becomes a derelict — it becomes unfixable,” Mr. Guokas said.

The damage from a burst pipe could be so severe that it would be cheaper to find a new mobile home than to make repairs on his decades-old unit. But with his income of just \$1,400 a month from Social Security, he has no idea how he would afford either.

As the scale of the destruction came into clearer view on Saturday, thousands of displaced people across the Boulder area began to confront questions about whether they would rebuild and how they would find temporary housing in a region confronting a stark shortage of homes and an affordability crisis that has already priced many young families out of Louisville and Superior.

Even as Ms. Bowdey’s husband, a property manager, fights off Covid-19 at a hotel, he has been inundated with 200 requests for housing from families who now have no place to go, she said, adding, “It kind of hits you every so often that this is not just weeks and months — this is years.”

Clint Folsom, the mayor of Superior, said that finding long-term housing for so many families was the next emergency. While his home survived the fire, his 76-year-old mother’s home burned to the ground, as did two homes his sister-in-law owns.

“We’ve got hundreds and hundreds of people who are going to need housing,” Mr. Folsom said. “That’s going to be the challenge.”

But residents said they were anxious about whether to rebuild in a suburb that felt newly vulnerable to the devastating effects of a warmer, drier climate in the Mountain West. If their suburban blocks and the neighborhood hotel and Target store were vulnerable to fires, where was safe?

“This is a new world we’re living in,” said Jennifer Balch, the director of the Earth Lab at the University of Colorado Boulder. “We need to completely rethink where homes are at risk.”

The community’s most urgent needs were clear on Saturday outside a Y.M.C.A. in the nearby town of Lafayette that had been converted into a Red Cross shelter. Thirty cars idled outside in single-digit temperatures, waiting for volunteers handing out portable heaters and bottled water.

Inside were roughly 120 people who had sought shelter, many of them still unsure if their homes were standing.

Pat Wilhelm, 66, had to rebuild much of his home after a 2013 electrical fire, and as he sat inside the evacuation site, he said he was still waiting on word of whether his house had survived this blaze.

“If it’s there, it’s there,” he said. “If it’s not, you deal with it.”

Nicolas and Katie Ferrington were among the residents who now had an answer. Less than a year after they had finished building their four-bedroom “forever home” on a ridge in the Spanish Hills subdivision, it was gone.

“It’s like a death,” said Mrs. Ferrington, 40, who owns a physical therapy business. “It’s a shock.”

The Ferringtons planned to rebuild on the same spot but were worried about what their home insurance would cover, as their policy had been tied to the lower value of a structure they had demolished to build their new home.

“We are viewing this as an opportunity to start over,” Mr. Ferrington said.

But others were still just trying to process their losses and the road ahead. The scale of the devastation did not feel real to Eric Egaas, 18, until he and his mother reached the home where the family had lived for more than two decades, having moved in as other houses in their subdivision were still being built.

By the time they got to the house, little was left apart from the patch of pavement where Mr. Egaas and his sister had pressed their hands into wet concrete as children.

His mother, Korina Bersentes, said the family had not yet decided whether to rebuild.

“I do fear that this is going to be the new norm in the West,” she said. “It’s not going to be wildfires in the mountains. It’s going to be wildfires everywhere.”

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HEADLINE	01/01 Year has changed, Covid surge hasn't
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/01/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#the-year-has-changed-the-coronavirus-surge-hasnt
GIST	<p>The new year is here and has brought the Omicron-driven virus wave along with it.</p> <p>More than 3.5 million people worldwide died from the coronavirus in 2021, almost twice as many as in 2020. The Delta variant wreaked havoc around the world, and now the Omicron variant, which has already become dominant in the United States, is fueling a spike in cases.</p> <p>Omicron has spread to more than 100 countries after it was first identified in Botswana and South Africa in late November, infecting previously vaccinated people as well as those who have previously been infected. But South African officials say their country has now crested its Omicron wave, and new cases are falling, all without a major increase in deaths — offering hope that, while other countries may see similar weeks of intensity, they may also see drop-offs and fewer deaths than in previous waves.</p> <p>For the United States, the coming weeks look difficult. “We’ll be in for a tough January, as cases will keep going up and peak, and then fall fast,” said Ali Mokdad, a University of Washington epidemiologist who is a former Centers for Disease Control and Prevention scientist.</p> <p>While virus cases will still overwhelm hospitals, he said, he expects that the proportion of cases resulting in hospitalization will be lower than in earlier waves. Studies in animals suggest that Omicron does not invade the lungs as readily, which may help explain its generally lessened severity.</p> <p>New estimates from researchers at Columbia University suggest that the United States could peak by Jan. 9 at around 2.5 million cases per week, though that number may go as high as 5.4 million. In New York City, the first U.S. metropolis to see a major surge, the researchers estimated that cases would peak by the first week of the new year.</p> <p>“It’s shocking. It’s disturbing,” said Jeffrey Shaman, an epidemiologist who led the Columbia modeling work. “We’re seeing unprecedented numbers of Covid-19 cases.”</p> <p>At the same time, Dr. Shaman said, there is a possibility that as cases fall in areas now experiencing major Omicron surges, other areas currently less affected will see their own Omicron surges, leading to a more rounded case curve nationally. The country’s hottest spots now are mostly clustered in the eastern half of the country.</p> <p>The United States set a single-day record with 489,000 cases on Wednesday, and then broke the record again on Thursday when it tallied 582,000 cases, according to a New York Times database.</p>

Return to Top	<p>The number of new cases fell from those record numbers on Friday, when many states did not report data on New Year's Eve. But the tally was still exceptionally high, with 443,000 new cases in just 28 states.</p> <p>Even the staggering numbers from the past several days are undercounts, as the holiday season causes major distortions in testing and data reporting. The growing use of at-home tests makes the accounting even more questionable.</p> <p>Genome sequencing shows that Omicron has exponential growth because some of its dozens of mutations appear to speed up transmission. But new studies, including one that surveyed one million coronavirus patients in England, support research that shows that two doses of vaccines are offering significant protection against severe disease, even though Omicron has been consistently better at evading vaccines.</p> <p>Doctors are urging anyone who is unvaccinated to get their first vaccine dose as soon as possible, and anyone who is inoculated to get a booster shot.</p> <p>"We are all tired and ready for this to be over," said Dr. Brian Garibaldi, clinical lead of the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center. "But we still have a lot of work to do and a long way to go."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/01 Hopeful signs amid omicron wave
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/01/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#hopeful-signs-amid-the-omicron-wave-the-week-in-science-news
GIST	<p>Even as coronavirus cases were shooting up at a dizzying pace in the United States this week, scientific evidence arrived providing hope for those who fall ill because of the Omicron variant — and for countries, states and communities battling its surge.</p> <p>People infected with Omicron were about half as likely to be hospitalized as those with the Delta variant, according to a report from British health officials, and they were only one-third as likely to need emergency care. However, even though risk may be reduced on an individual level, Omicron is still expected to cause further strain on health care systems simply because of the enormous numbers of people it is and will be infecting.</p> <p>The report, issued by the U.K. Health Security Agency, also showed that vaccination offers strong protection against Covid's worst outcomes. The risk of hospitalization in Omicron cases was 65 percent lower in people who had received two doses, compared with the unvaccinated, and 81 percent lower in those who had gotten boosters.</p> <p>Based on 528,176 Omicron cases and 573,012 Delta cases, the report is one of the largest real-world examinations of Omicron infections to date.</p> <p>Several recent studies on lab animals and human tissues have offered a possible explanation for Omicron's milder effects: It often concentrates in the nose, throat and windpipe, rather than damaging the lungs, as previous variants did.</p> <p>More good news came in the form of a laboratory study from South African scientists suggesting that people who have recovered from an Omicron infection may be able to repel infections by the Delta variant. If Omicron outcompetes Delta, that could mean a future with fewer hospitalizations and deaths, making it easier for humanity to coexist with the virus.</p> <p>Parents received some reassurance this week, as well. While there has been an increase in hospitalizations among children during Omicron's advance, that appears to simply reflect the vast increase overall in infections. Doctors and researchers said that they were not seeing evidence that the variant was harder on children than previous versions of the virus. Preliminary data says that Omicron is actually milder in children, as has been the case with adults.</p>

Also, one report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine showed that serious problems among children ages 5 to 11 who had received it were [extremely rare](#), and another found that nearly all serious illnesses in a group of hundreds of pediatric hospitalizations occurred in children who had not been fully vaccinated.

In the bigger picture, the new year dawned with [reasons for hope](#). Omicron will exact a toll, but after it does, more people will have Covid immunity. And newly approved post-infection treatments from Merck and Pfizer have the potential to make Covid a far less deadly disease.

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HEADLINE	01/01 How high will surge go after holidays?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/01/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#omicron-covid-holidays-surge-testing
GIST	<p>The United States is in the midst of a case spike averaging more than 300,000 new cases a day for the first time in the pandemic as holiday gatherings and travel coupled with the proliferation of the highly transmissible Omicron variant have propelled a surge across the country.</p> <p>On Dec. 30, there was a daily average of 378,516 positive coronavirus cases, a 201 percent increase in the last two weeks, according to a New York Times database. Daily counts increased by 100,000 or more on three days running in the last week. Hospitalizations rose 25 percent in two weeks.</p> <p>As the Omicron variant speeds through communities around the country, many more people, including those who have been vaccinated, will test positive for the coronavirus. Some projections forecast millions of new cases in the next week.</p> <p>Here's what you should know:</p> <p>What Covid symptoms should I look out for?</p> <p>Some symptom differences between Omicron and other variants have emerged from preliminary data, but experts are not certain they are meaningful. Data released from South Africa suggest that South Africans with Omicron often develop a scratchy or sore throat along with nasal congestion, a dry cough and muscle pain, especially low back pain.</p> <p>Meanwhile, the Delta variant is still spreading as well. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the most common Covid symptoms include fever, a dry cough, fatigue, chills, muscle pain, sore throat, headache, a loss of the sense of taste or smell and difficulty breathing or shortness of breath. If you are feeling sick, get tested immediately.</p> <p>I'm not feeling sick. Should I still get tested?</p> <p>You can be infected without showing symptoms, and could spread the virus to others, even if you are vaccinated. It is always better to get tested for the coronavirus, especially to try to halt the spread of Omicron. Given the high spread rates in recent weeks, if you have gone to a large gathering it is probably better to get tested.</p> <p>The current guidance from the C.D.C. says vaccinated people don't have to quarantine if they have had close contact with someone who has Covid, but that they should get tested five days later. Testing experts, however, say that's probably not soon enough for Omicron, whose incubation period may be as short as 72 hours. Experts say that the best times to test are on Days 2, 3 and 4 after exposure.</p> <p>What are my testing options?</p> <p>There are several testing options. You can test at home with a rapid test purchased from a pharmacy, or you can go get a P.C.R. test at a lab.</p> <p>If you tested positive after taking a rapid home test, you may want to take a second home test using a different brand or go to a testing center to confirm the result.</p>

I tested positive. What do I do now?

If you're in public or around people [when you receive the news](#), put on a mask immediately. Then isolate yourself as quickly as possible, even if you don't have symptoms.

Last week, the C.D.C [slashed the isolation period from 10 to five days](#) for those who are vaccinated, those without symptoms, or those without fevers whose other symptoms were resolving.

Americans leaving isolation should wear masks around others for an additional five days after their isolation periods have ended, officials said.

Some experts, though, [have called the new guidelines "reckless"](#) and have suggested to isolate for longer. To calculate your isolation window, [the C.D.C. advises](#) that you consider Day 1 to be the first full day after you develop symptoms.

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HEADLINE	01/01 New York surge shows no signs slowing
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/01/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#new-york-reports-85000-cases-in-a-day-another-record-as-surge-shows-no-sign-of-slowing
GIST	<p>New York State recorded over 85,000 new coronavirus cases on the last day of 2021, the highest one-day total in the state since the pandemic began, officials announced on Saturday.</p> <p>The number of positive test results — 85,476, or roughly 22 percent of the total tests reported by the state — once again outstripped a record set just the day before. And New York's turbocharged increase in cases shows no signs of slowing, with new infections from holiday travel and gatherings most likely not yet reflected in official counts.</p> <p>"As we fight the winter surge, we need to keep the most vulnerable among us in mind — do what you can to keep others in your community safe from Covid-19," Gov. Kathy Hochul said in a statement announcing the state's latest totals. "Wear a mask, wash your hands and take advantage of the best tool we have at our disposal — the vaccine."</p> <p>New York is one of several hot spots — along with Washington, D.C., and other Eastern states — leading a national surge. On Thursday, a record 585,013 new cases were recorded nationwide, and hospitalizations are trending upward across much of the country.</p> <p>In the previous 24 hours in New York State, nearly 90,000 vaccine doses had been administered, according to Governor Hochul's statement. Eighty-eight deaths in the state were attributed to Covid. Nationally, there were 1,181 Covid deaths recorded on Friday, according to a New York Times database.</p> <p>As recently as two weeks ago, a total of 21,000 positive tests in New York was enough to set an alarming record. The stunning recent increases in positivity rates, fueled at least in part by the highly transmissible Omicron variant, served as an unwelcome reminder that the pandemic was entering its third year.</p> <p>Although it involved substantially fewer cases, the U.S. winter surge around the same time last year crested on Jan. 12, suggesting that the country may have a week or more before this current wave reaches its peak. According to some testing experts, however, Omicron's incubation period may be as short as 72 hours, which could accelerate this wave's progression.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/01 Pierce Co. opens free Covid testing site
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/pierce-county-open-covid-test-site-state-fairgrounds-demand-surges/AUNZPQNJUZD2RFDG5LFVMI7HM/

GIST	<p>PIERCE COUNTY, Wash. — Responding to increasing demand for COVID-19 testing and a lack of room to accommodate those flocking to test sites, Pierce County is opening an additional place to get tested starting Monday.</p> <p>The temporary drive-through site will be open through Jan. 7 in Puyallup at the Washington State Fair grounds Gold Lot located at 110 9th Ave. SW. Tests are free and appointments are not required.</p> <p>Rapid tests will not be available at the site. Results will be available in three to five days. The site will be open from noon to 6 p.m. Monday and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. the rest of the week.</p> <p>The opening follows a week where high demand for COVID tests met cold temperatures and snowy weather that forced Pierce County Emergency Management to close testing sites Thursday in Lakewood and Tacoma. Earlier in the week, the weather forced the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department to temporarily close several of its testing sites.</p> <p>When testing sites were open, staff could hardly keep up. Department of Emergency Management spokesperson Mike Halliday said the Lakewood site at 3003 107th St. S. was closed for two hours Wednesday due to overwhelming demand.</p> <p>“It just became an issue of safety for both the folks coming to the site and site staff,” Halliday said.</p> <p>That site tested about 1,100 people Wednesday, down from more than 1,500 Tuesday. Halliday said the two-hour closure was part of the reason for the dip in tests.</p> <p>The new testing site has more room to handle a large volume of people thanks to its larger parking lot, Halliday said. He hopes the site will provide some relief for other testing sites seeing increases in traffic.</p> <p>The Puyallup Tribe site at 2024 E. 29th St. in Tacoma and the Lakewood site are closed Saturday, but the Lakewood site will reopen starting Sunday. The Puyallup Tribe site reopens Wednesday.</p> <p>Halliday asked people to be patient with staff and one another. Staff have been working as hard as they can, sometimes in difficult weather conditions, he said.</p> <p>“We’re all trying to get the same thing,” he said. “We’re all trying to get tested so we can keep ourselves and our family and friends and community safe, so just be patient and be kind to each other.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/31 Cost of Covid tests rising w/demand
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/cost-covid-19-tests-rising-with-demand/PCSWQFEHUBGFTCOGTN5VVKT27A/
GIST	<p>KING COUNTY, Wash. — As coronavirus cases surge, demand for testing is growing so high some private companies are charging hundreds of dollars for each rapid PCR test.</p> <p>This comes as UW testing facilities are closing early, or altogether, because of the cold weather.</p> <p>KIRO 7 talked to a Kirkland man whose parents were headed back to India, with no time to spare. So, they came here for their COVID-19 tests. And he paid a pretty penny.</p> <p>Business was brisk at GS Labs in Bellevue, on offer, rapid COVID-19 tests.</p> <p>This is where Pradeep Narayanashetty ended up in a desperate search for tests for his visiting parents.</p> <p>“It’s a requirement from the Indian government,” he said. “When you enter the country you need to have a RPCR test done.”</p>

Narayanashetty first tried the free drive-in testing sites, and national pharmacies too.

“There were no appointments,” he said. “Yeah, yeah, none of them.”

So they tried a walk-in urgent care center and got sticker shock.

“Two-fifty bucks for the test,” said Narayanashetty.

But his parents did not have U.S. insurance.

“Then I’d have to pay an additional \$500 bucks,” he said. “So, just in the ballpark of \$750 to \$800 for one person to get the test done there.”

Arden Hoover and his family were exposed to COVID-19 on their Christmas cruise to Mexico.

“We just looked around at all these testing sites and they were all switching over to appointment only,” he said.

So, they, too, were desperate to get a rapid test.

They ended up here at Discovery Health at Seattle’s Fisherman’s terminal. The cost: \$180 per test. They needed four of them.

“Nobody likes to shell out \$720 bucks or whatever it was,” said his father, Nathan. “At least we were able to do it.”

At GS Labs, it cost nearly \$800 for Pradeep Narayanashetty’s parents to be tested, half the cost at urgent care. But it is still a hefty sum.

“It felt like the weather, the holidays,” he said. “And then maybe there was some sort of price gouging, I guess.”

It says on the GS Labs website, that each test costs \$385 dollars. It also says most of the cost will be paid by insurance. But if you aren’t insured, you will pay and pay big.

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HEADLINE	12/31 Seattle New Year celebrations subdued
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/celebrations-subdued-as-seattle-welcomes-new-year
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - Fireworks returned to the Seattle Space Needle Friday night after a two year absence but with COVID-19 cases surging locally and nationally the crowds that normally gather to usher in a new year were asked to stay away.</p> <p>Instead of people packed in for a prime viewing spot of the fireworks display, fencing surrounded the base of the attraction to prevent a throng of people from gathering.</p> <p>But the gates didn’t stop everyone.</p> <p>“People are going to do what people are going to do,” said Raymart Santos, who flew to Seattle from Hawaii for the holiday. “They are still going to celebrate, have fun and be safe at the same time.”</p> <p>Because of the rapid spread of the omicron variant throughout King County, officials didn’t want large crowds of gatherings for fear of a super spreader event occurring.</p> <p>Instead, organizers of the fireworks display at Seattle Center introduced a virtual reality component this year that was live streamed for people to see not in person, but on televisions, laptops and phones.</p>

"The fact that it is both virtual and physical, it would probably be better for people to watch the virtual production so they can get the full show," said Rayshugga, who planned to spend New Year's Eve at home.

Still, the city did play host to large gatherings as 2021 was about to give way to 2022.

Comedian Dave Chappelle headlined at Climate Pledge Arena and the lines outside stretched to the streets.

"We're seeing the hottest, biggest comedian (and) the most well-known comedian in the entire world," said Oliver Guarine while standing in line for entrance. "So, it's pretty exciting."

Local bars and nightclubs hosted their own parties.

The early part of the night saw much crowds that were smaller than usual around Seattle's Belltown area but there were still plenty of people ready to bar hop.

"We are doing all the bars," said Jessica Mikner, who was out to cruise the town with her girlfriends. "Whatever's open (and) whatever isn't too expensive."

News about surging COVID-19 case rates from the omicron variant did prompt some to change their New Year's Eve plans, but others said they were ready to embrace the moment and bid adieu in style to 2021.

A lot of the local bars and clubs added extra staff to help check vaccination status and enforce mask wearing policies. A few required reservations to cut down on the bar-hopping.

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HEADLINE	01/02 New year, more canceled flights; frustration
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/new-year-brings-more-canceled-flights-for-air-travelers/
GIST	<p>For air travelers, the new year picked up where the old one left off – with lots of frustration.</p> <p>By late Saturday afternoon on the East Coast, more than 2,600 U.S. flights and nearly 4,600 worldwide had been canceled, according to tracking service FlightAware.</p> <p>That is the highest single-day U.S. toll yet since just before Christmas, when airlines began blaming staffing shortages on increasing COVID-19 infections among crews. More than 12,000 U.S. flights have been canceled since Dec. 24.</p> <p>Saturday's disruptions weren't just due to the virus, however. Wintry weather made Chicago — where forecasts called for 9 inches (23 centimeters) of snow — the worst place in the country for travelers. More than 800 flights were scrubbed at O'Hare Airport and more than 250 at Midway Airport.</p> <p>Southwest Airlines suspended operations at both Chicago airports because of the forecast, according to an airline spokeswoman. She said Southwest knows from years of operating at Midway that high winds and blowing snow make it hard to get planes back in the air quickly.</p> <p>Southwest canceled more than 450 flights nationwide, or 13% of its schedule. American Airlines and Delta Air Lines scrubbed more than 200 flights each, and United Airlines canceled more than 150.</p> <p>SkyWest, a regional carrier that operates flights under the names American Eagle, Delta Connection and United Express, grounded 480 flights, one-fourth of its schedule. A spokesperson blamed weather in Chicago, Denver and Detroit and COVID-19 illnesses.</p> <p>Among international carriers, China Eastern scrubbed more than 500 flights, or about one-fourth of its total, and Air China canceled more than 200 flights, one-fifth of its schedule, according to FlightAware.</p>

Sunday, when many travelers plan to return home from holiday trips, is shaping up to be difficult, too. More than 1,900 flights, including more than 1,000 in the U.S., had been canceled by late Saturday. A winter storm with heavy snow is expected to march toward the Northeast as a new storm hits the Pacific Northwest, according to the National Weather Service.

Airlines say they are taking steps to reduce cancellations. United is offering to pay pilots triple or more of their usual wages for picking up open flights through most of January. Spirit Airlines reached a deal with the Association of Flight Attendants for double pay for cabin crews through Tuesday, said a union spokeswoman.

When winter weather hit the Pacific Northwest earlier this week, Alaska Airlines urged customers to delay any “non-essential” trips that were planned through this weekend. With full flights over the New Year’s holiday, the airline said it wasn’t sure it could rebook stranded passengers for at least three days.

Airlines hope that extra pay and reduced schedules get them through the holiday crush and into the heart of January, when travel demand usually drops off. The seasonal decline could be sharper than normal this year because most business travelers are still grounded.

Travelers who stuck to the roads instead of the skies faced challenges, too. Transportation officials in the Midwest warned motorists that a mix of rain and snow could make roads slippery and reduce visibility, leading to hazardous driving conditions.

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HEADLINE	12/31 Studies suggest why omicron is less severe
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/31/health/covid-omicron-lung-cells.html
GIST	<p>A spate of new studies on lab animals and human tissues are providing the first indication of why the Omicron variant causes milder disease than previous versions of the coronavirus.</p> <p>In studies on mice and hamsters, Omicron produced less damaging infections, often limited largely to the upper airway: the nose, throat and windpipe. The variant did much less harm to the lungs, where previous variants would often cause scarring and serious breathing difficulty.</p> <p>“It’s fair to say that the idea of a disease that manifests itself primarily in the upper respiratory system is emerging,” said Roland Eils, a computational biologist at the Berlin Institute of Health, who has studied how coronaviruses infect the airway.</p> <p>In November, when the first report on the Omicron variant came out of South Africa, scientists could only guess at how it might behave differently from earlier forms of the virus. All they knew was that it had a distinctive and alarming combination of more than 50 genetic mutations.</p> <p>Previous research had shown that some of these mutations enabled coronaviruses to grab onto cells more tightly. Others allowed the virus to evade antibodies, which serve as an early line of defense against infection. But how the new variant might behave inside of the body was a mystery.</p> <p>“You can’t predict the behavior of virus from just the mutations,” said Ravindra Gupta, a virologist at the University of Cambridge.</p> <p>Over the past month, more than a dozen research groups, including Dr. Gupta’s, have been observing the new pathogen in the lab, infecting cells in Petri dishes with Omicron and spraying the virus into the noses of animals.</p> <p>As they worked, Omicron surged across the planet, readily infecting even people who were vaccinated or had recovered from infections.</p>

But as cases skyrocketed, hospitalizations increased only modestly. Early studies of patients suggested that Omicron was less likely to cause severe illness than other variants, especially in vaccinated people. Still, those findings came with a lot of caveats.

For one thing, the bulk of early Omicron infections were in young people, who are less likely to get seriously ill with all versions of the virus. And many of those early cases were happening in people with some immunity from previous infections or vaccines. It was unclear whether Omicron would also prove less severe in an unvaccinated older person, for example.

Experiments on animals can help clear up these ambiguities, because scientists can test Omicron on identical animals living in identical conditions. More than half a dozen experiments made public in recent days all pointed to the same conclusion: Omicron is milder than Delta and other earlier versions of the virus.

On Wednesday, a large consortium of Japanese and American scientists released a [report](#) on hamsters and mice that had been infected with either Omicron or one of several earlier variants. Those infected with Omicron had less lung damage, lost less weight and were less likely to die, the study found.

Although the animals infected with Omicron on average experienced much milder symptoms, the scientists were particularly struck by the results in Syrian hamsters, a species known to get severely ill with all previous versions of the virus.

“This was surprising, since every other variant has robustly infected these hamsters,” said Dr. Michael Diamond, a virologist at Washington University and a co-author of the study.

Several [other](#) studies on [mice](#) and [hamsters](#) have reached the same conclusion. (Like most urgent Omicron research, these studies have been posted online but have not yet been published in scientific journals.)

The reason that Omicron is milder may be a matter of anatomy. Dr. Diamond and his colleagues found that the level of Omicron in the noses of the hamsters was the same as in animals infected with an earlier form of the coronavirus. But Omicron levels in the lungs were one-tenth or less of the level of other variants.

A [similar finding](#) came from researchers at the University of Hong Kong who studied bits of tissue taken from human airways during surgery. In 12 lung samples, the researchers found that Omicron grew more slowly than Delta and other variants did.

The researchers also infected tissue from the bronchi, the tubes in the upper chest that deliver air from the windpipe to the lungs. And inside of those bronchial cells, in the first two days after an infection, Omicron grew faster than Delta or the original coronavirus did.

These findings will have to be followed up with further studies, such as experiments with monkeys or examination of the airways of people infected with Omicron. If the results hold up to scrutiny, they might explain why people infected with Omicron seem less likely to be hospitalized than those with Delta.

Coronavirus infections start in the nose or possibly the [mouth](#) and spread down the throat. Mild infections don’t get much further than that. But when the coronavirus reaches the lungs, it can do serious damage.

Immune cells in the lungs can overreact, killing off not just infected cells but uninfected ones. They can produce runaway inflammation, scarring the lung’s delicate walls. What’s more, the viruses can escape from the damaged lungs into the bloodstream, triggering clots and ravaging other organs.

Dr. Gupta suspects that his team’s new data give a molecular explanation for why Omicron doesn’t fare so well in the lungs.

Many cells in the lung carry a protein called TMPRSS2 on their surface that can inadvertently help passing viruses gain entry to the cell. But Dr. Gupta's team found that this protein doesn't grab on to Omicron very well. As a result, Omicron does a worse job of infecting cells in this manner than Delta does. A team at the University of Glasgow [independently came to the same conclusion](#).

Through an alternative route, coronaviruses can also slip into cells that don't make TMPRSS2. Higher in the airway, cells tend not to carry the protein, which might explain the evidence that Omicron is found there more often than the lungs.

Dr. Gupta speculated that Omicron evolved into an upper-airway specialist, thriving in the throat and nose. If that's true, the virus might have a better chance of getting expelled in tiny drops into the surrounding air and encountering new hosts.

"It's all about what happens in the upper airway for it to transmit, right?" he said. "It's not really what happens down below in the lungs, where the severe disease stuff happens. So you can understand why the virus has evolved in this way."

While these studies clearly help explain why Omicron causes milder disease, they don't yet answer why the variant is so good at spreading from one person to another. The United States logged [more than 580,000 cases](#) on Thursday alone, the majority of which are thought to be Omicron.

"These studies address the question about what may happen in the lungs but don't really address the question of transmissibility," said Sara Cherry, a virologist at the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania.

Dr. Diamond said he wanted to wait for more studies to be carried out, especially in people instead of animals, before endorsing the hypothesis that TMPRSS2 is the key to understanding Omicron. "I think it is still premature on this," he said.

Scientists know that part of Omicron's contagiousness comes from its ability to evade antibodies, allowing it to easily get into cells of vaccinated people far more easily than other variants. But they suspect that Omicron has some other biological advantages as well.

Last week, researchers [reported](#) that the variant carries a mutation that may weaken so-called innate immunity, a molecular alarm that rapidly activates our immune system at the first sign of an invasion in the [nose](#). But it will take more experiments to see if this is indeed one of Omicron's secrets to success.

"It could be as simple as, this is a lot more virus in people's saliva and nasal passages," Dr. Cherry said. But there could be other explanations for its efficient spread: It could be more stable in the air, or better infect new hosts. "I think it's really an important question," she said.

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HEADLINE	01/01 L.A. County beaches close: huge sewage spill
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/01/us/sewage-spill-los-angeles.html
GIST	<p>About seven million gallons of untreated sewage have spilled into a flood-control waterway in Los Angeles County since Thursday afternoon, prompting at least five beaches to close, an official with the Los Angeles County Sanitation Districts said.</p> <p>"It is a lot," said Bryan Langpap, a spokesman for the agency. "That's the biggest spill we've ever had."</p> <p>The spill began after a concrete pipe 48 inches in diameter in Carson, Calif., collapsed. The sewage leaked out of a manhole on 212th Street on Thursday evening and much of Friday, Mr. Langpap said.</p>

From there, the waste traveled through storm drain pipes and toward the Dominguez Channel, a flood-control waterway that runs more than 15 miles from Hawthorne, Calif., and discharges into Los Angeles Harbor. Water from the channel eventually flows to the Pacific Ocean.

Officials are investigating what caused the pipe, which was built in the 1960s, to collapse.

“We actually have a project in construction now that was going to replace this sewer; that project isn’t done,” Mr. Langpap said. “So I’m sure it was related to age, but what was the straw that broke the camel’s back, we don’t know yet.”

At least five beaches were closed on Saturday, according to [the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health](#), disrupting holiday plans and leading to the cancellation of some events, such as the [70th annual Polar Bear Swim](#) at Cabrillo Beach.

Dr. Anissa Davis, the Long Beach City health officer, said in a [statement](#) on Friday that inspectors were “monitoring water quality along the affected beach sites,” and that beaches would be closed until the water quality met state requirements.

Untreated sewage and polluted water can expose swimmers to pathogens, according to the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#).

Janice Hahn, a member of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, said on [Twitter](#) on Friday that “a spill of this magnitude is dangerous and unacceptable, and we need to understand what happened.”

She added that recent storms in the area, which have brought [heavy rain across the state](#), most likely contributed to the collapse. “We need infrastructure that doesn’t fail when it rains,” Ms. Hahn said.

Since Thursday, crews have set up five sewer bypass pipe systems, which suck sewage out of a blockage and into another manhole, Mr. Langpap said. By Friday night, crews had stopped the spill entirely, he said.

But because the spill was occurring near a freeway, the unclogging process was complicated and prolonged, leading to millions more gallons of waste being spilled, Mr. Langpap said.

“We never want to have a sewage spill,” he said. “That’s our job, is to collect and treat the sewage and protect the environment. So it is a large flow, and we just have to do that monitoring now to see what impact was there.”

On Saturday morning, crews were working on temporarily restoring the collapsed sewer line, and a permanent repair will be done later, though an exact timeline has yet to be determined, Mr. Langpap said. The Dominguez Channel was the site of another environmental problem this year.

[A fire in September at a beauty product warehouse](#) in Carson released a foul stench in the air and chemicals into the sewage system that ultimately drained into the Dominguez Channel. The spill led to the decay of organic materials in the channel, resulting in the emission of hydrogen sulfide gas that far exceeded the state’s nuisance standard, according to the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works.

Last summer, 17 million gallons of raw sewage were [discharged into Santa Monica Bay](#) after a sprawling wastewater treatment plant in Los Angeles experienced problems, prompting several beach closures.

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HEADLINE	01/01 Omicron rise: bracing for work, school
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/01/us/omicron-covid-pandemic-despair.html
GIST	In two short weeks, as the year closed out, the Omicron variant drove coronavirus case counts to record levels, upended air travel and left gaping staffing holes at police departments, firehouses and hospitals.

And that was at a time many people were off for the holiday season. Now comes Monday, with millions of Americans having traveled back home to start school and work again, and no one is sure of what comes next.

Most of the nation's largest school districts have decided to forge ahead and remain open, at least for the time being, citing the toll that remote learning has taken on students' mental health and academic success. And the rising number of cases has not yet been followed by a proportionate increase in hospitalizations and deaths, though hospitalizations have increased in recent days — a sign that the Omicron variant seems to cause fewer cases of severe illness.

But the highly contagious variant is still racing across the country, and teachers, parents and workplaces are bracing for the impact.

"I figured that over these two weeks of break, everyone has been everywhere visiting everybody," said Teresa Morrison, 48, who plans to keep her 8-year-old daughter Tristan, who suffers from severe bronchitis, from attending in-person classes in San Antonio. "So I really just anticipate January to be a disaster."

The rapid spread of the Omicron variant has left companies across industries — from meatpacking to retail — with a thinning work force, especially after months of record high resignations. Thousands of flights have been canceled and National Guard troops have been activated to help staff hospitals.

The spiking case counts have also flummoxed the dozens of companies that sent their employees to work from home in March 2020, as Covid was first sweeping the country. Some offices that had reopened advised workers to stay home. Others, including major companies like Apple and Google, have [extended their work-from-home arrangements](#).

In schools, the spread of Covid-19 has been limited, but Omicron has renewed some fears just as a sense of normalcy seemed within reach.

For many teachers, students and parents, the fall semester had seemed promising. By mid-December, Brayden Boren, a high school English teacher in San Antonio, had begun to feel as if an end to the long, exhausting battle against the pandemic was within sight.

Then Omicron arrived in Texas. By the week of Dec. 11, it accounted for about 25 percent of all new infections, according to state data. A week later, it spiked to 85 percent. In the past two weeks, the number of new cases being reported each day in Texas has increased by 240 percent.

Mr. Boren, 27, who has not had the virus, saw it all around him. "Even in my small, little friends group, they were popping up, one by one by one," he said. "No one was really getting it, until now."

Now, Mr. Boren is questioning whether a return to in-person learning makes any sense. "It's a hard time to be a teacher. How far can we push ourselves?"

Health officials have warned that the unvaccinated remain most at risk of severe illness or death from Omicron. More than 70 percent of people 12 and older in the United States are fully vaccinated, [according to the C.D.C.](#) About a quarter of children between ages 5 and 11 have received at least one dose of a vaccine. Children under 5 are still not eligible for them.

For business leaders, the constant change in public health conditions and guidelines has meant acclimating to a new level of flexibility. "They don't give you a playbook at Harvard Business School on the pandemic," said Yancey Spruill, chief executive of the tech company DigitalOcean, which told its staff it will allow remote work indefinitely.

Across the country, workers were steeling themselves for months of disruptions to come.

“I’ve been working through most of the pandemic, and I hadn’t tested positive before Omicron,” said Amelia Smoak, 29, who works at a restaurant and bar in Manhattan’s East Village neighborhood. She is fully vaccinated but recently recovered from a mild case of Covid. She added that business has gotten far slower as case counts rise: “Tips have been stable, but head count went down drastically.”

Scientists are [projecting](#) that the country’s sharp increase in cases will crest by the middle of January. But much about the new variant remains uncertain, and experts remain worried that hospitals might be overwhelmed.

The number of cases in New York [continues to rise steeply](#), yet city school officials have vowed to keep schools open, embracing increased testing as an alternative to closing classrooms.

Schools in Chicago, Washington and most other major cities have announced they also plan to reopen this week, many with increased testing regimens. But some districts — including public schools in Cleveland; Prince George’s County, Md., a suburb of Washington, D.C.; Newark, N.J.; Mt. Vernon, N.Y.; and Jersey City, N.J. — will transition to remote learning for one week or more in January.

In Chicago, where businesses have remained open as cases have spiked to their highest levels of the pandemic, public school leaders said they planned to return to class as scheduled on Monday despite concerns from the city’s powerful teachers’ union about safety precautions.

“If they shut down the restaurants, they shut down all the events, every component of the city and state, then hey, I’m not going to put my families at risk, I’m not going to force them to take their children to school,” said Pedro Martinez, the chief executive of Chicago Public Schools. He added: “But short of that, what is the logic of thinking that somehow shutting down schools is going to help this pandemic? I don’t see the logic.”

Chicago Teachers Union officials have criticized the district’s testing, ventilation and staffing plans, and they expressed concern about the potential for breakthrough cases among vaccinated employees.

Stacy Davis Gates, the union’s vice president, predicted chaos when classes resume on Monday. On Thursday, the union asked school officials to put in place a number of new precautions, including a requirement that all returning students test negative for Covid-19, or pause in-person instruction in the absence of widespread testing.

“We’re very concerned about short-staffed buildings,” Ms. Davis Gates said. “We’re very concerned that parents will lose confidence and not send their kids back to our school communities.”

Several Chicago-area colleges announced either delayed starts or shifts to remote learning, including DePaul University, the University of Chicago and Northwestern University.

Similar announcements came from a number of major universities across the country, from the University of California system to New York University, Syracuse, and Binghamton in New York, bringing the number of U.S. colleges and universities announcing a move to remote instruction for part or all of January to nearly 50.

In Cleveland, parents had been bracing for possible remote instruction since the day before the winter break, when the district closed 14 of its 90 schools because faculty and staff members were out sick. The announcement came midweek that the 35,000-student district would begin its spring semester remotely, with Eric S. Gordon, the district’s chief executive, citing a “dramatic increase” in the infection rate in Cleveland.

Ohio set records in recent days for both Covid infections and hospitalizations, prompting the state’s governor, Mike DeWine, a Republican, to mobilize additional members of the Ohio National Guard to help at hospitals — one of several states to do so.

Stacey Caprinolo, whose 15-year-old daughter Genevieve is a sophomore at Cleveland School of the Arts high school, took the news of the remote return to classes in stride. But not knowing when classes might resume made the uncertainty of the situation unsettling.

“It’s a week by week thing. It’s harder to plan,” Ms. Caprinolo said.

By moving to remote learning, Cleveland and several districts in the city’s suburbs were bucking the state’s Republican leadership, which had urged regular school sessions.

For some parents, returning to work was the least of their worries.

Kelli Gay’s holiday season was halted abruptly with two phone calls in mid-December.

Both her husband and oldest son had been exposed to Covid-19 at separate holiday parties in Florida. It would not be long before the entire household — two parents and three children — tested positive for the virus, stunning them back to the reality of the pandemic’s enduring presence. All of them had been at least partly vaccinated.

“We were still wearing our masks, but we were re-engaging with people and attended events,” said Ms. Gay, 45, a grants director at the Port of Miami who lost two relatives to Covid in 2020. “Then we got the phone calls.”

The test results precipitated a quiet Christmas but Ms. Gay was faced with a bigger crisis: What to do with her three school-age children when school resumes on Monday?

The school district where Ms. Gay lives in Miramar, Fla., where cases have shot up dramatically, is not offering virtual alternatives. And the state passed a law authorizing parents, rather than school districts, to decide whether their children wear a mask to school. That means her children can possibly be in classes with maskless students during this latest wave.

“High anxiety would be how I would describe what I am feeling,” she said. “So now our hopes are riding on enforcing the home rules, on the kids staying masked at school, keeping their distance and a little bottle of hand sanitizer in their backpacks.”

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HEADLINE	01/01 Pandemic wrench: auto parts shortages
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/auto-parts-shortages-push-repair-shops-to-get-creative-place-stress-on-customers/
GIST	<p>Two months after his 2015 GMC Acadia was T-boned, John Sellek remains carless.</p> <p>Sellek, of Brighton, Michigan, has been using rentals since that Oct. 28 crash, but his rental insurance is now up. Instead of forking over hundreds of dollars every week, Sellek and his wife have decided to share a vehicle.</p> <p>“I never could have imagined that this would go on so long that my insurance would actually run out,” he said.</p> <p>Accidents happen. But when they happen these days, it’s taking weeks to months for collision shops and dealers to get the parts they need to fix the vehicle, leaving customers like Sellek without the wheels they need. The wait is yet another example of how the pandemic has thrown a wrench in the supply chain system and forced repair shops and parts distributors to get creative with temporary fixes and find new vendors to help customers get back on the road.</p> <p>“It’s been incredibly eye opening because we all know about the supply chain problems around the world,” Sellek said. “We know that when I ordered something from Ikea it took literally five months for it</p>

to show up. We know and understand all those things are happening, but there are ways that it's pervasive in the areas that you wouldn't suspect that more directly impact your life."

Some auto parts suppliers have had to slow down making parts for older vehicles to get more parts for new vehicles out the door. A labor shortage slowed supply churn even more at the plants and at the ports and docks where supplies are unloaded.

"A significant portion of repair parts, particularly for collisions, come from Taiwan," said Dan Hearsch, managing director in AlixPartners' automotive and industrial practice. "Lots of that is backed up at the ports, so availability of that stuff is not great."

The more significant issue is the auto suppliers are less focused on making aftermarket parts for repairs to vehicles on the road and more intent on building parts for new vehicles, Hearsch added. "The last thing that they want to make or have to make are service parts, because service parts have a whole other level of complexity."

The situation is not getting better, Hearsch said, because the focus remains on getting new vehicle production back up and running. For the past year, automakers have struggled to keep up with the demand because of the global shortage of semiconductors, or microchips that are used to power systems in the vehicle from the heated seats to the infotainment systems.

Dave Hebert, manager of Berkley Collision in Berkley, Michigan, has had to get creative with parts to keep his customers on the road. Instead of just relying on new parts, the shop has found rebuilt and remanufactured parts at times to fix people's vehicles faster.

"But unfortunately the parts that we can't get new, the supplies from the other directions, have now dwindled down," he said.

Hebert has been working on vehicles for at least 40 years and can recall when a part or two would have a low stock, but he said he has never experienced an issue that affected this many parts at once. He also sees the situation is getting worse because of the low stock now popping up in the "alternative parts" supply.

Hebert's advice for customers who've been in an accident and need repairs: "Thoroughly check to make sure that all the parts are available before they surrender the car for repairs."

The supply woes have led to price increases. The Consumer Price Index on motor vehicle parts rose 10% from November 2020 to November 2021, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"There's absolutely been inflation in this sector," said Paul McCarthy, president of the Automotive Aftermarket Suppliers Association. "We've actually been struggling to pass on the cost increases as much as we can."

Advance Auto Parts has experienced price increases in its product costs and has worked with vendors to get the lowest price, Chief Financial Officer Jeff Shepherd said: "But this industry is fairly rational, and when necessary we have had to pass it on in the form of price."

During the supply chain choke, Advance — with more than 4,700 stores and 234 Worldpac branches — still saw a 13% increase in sales in the third quarter from pre-pandemic 2019 levels.

To keep the shelves stocked, Advance worked with vendors starting last year to buy more product than the company normally would to make sure they had enough. Advance also rolled out a new tool that tells merchant teams what parts to buy and what stores need them.

"What we've tried to do is make sure we focused on parts where you don't have a choice," Shepherd said. "If you have a Ford F-150 and you need brakes, you can't put Honda Accord brakes on a Ford F-150."

HEADLINE	12/31 Weather shelter: cold outside, Covid inside
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/homeless/a-night-in-a-seattle-severe-weather-shelter-with-snow-outside-but-threat-of-covid-inside/
GIST	<p>Simon Foster, director of operations for The Salvation Army in Seattle, weaves through a line that's been forming outside Exhibition Hall since a little after the sun went down on Tuesday. It's now nearly 7 p.m. and some people have been waiting in 28-degree weather for over an hour.</p> <p>"How much longer?" one of roughly two dozen people in line asks. Some are dressed for the cold; most are not. None are dressed to be outside all night, which is where they'd be without this shelter at Seattle Center.</p> <p>Foster looks at his watch. His eyes are bloodshot. He's had eight hours of sleep in the last four days.</p> <p>"Two minutes," he says through two masks.</p> <p>"Two minutes feels like years to us," a woman says.</p> <p>Foster pauses. "One minute 30 seconds," he says, closes the door behind him and walks into The Salvation Army's severe winter shelter.</p> <p>After the hottest summer and wettest fall on record, people living outside in Seattle — one of the largest homeless populations in the United States — face cold temperatures not seen in decades as the year draws to a close. On Tuesday, the high was 23 degrees Fahrenheit, the coldest day in Seattle in 31 years. In the same week, King County hit a record high number of coronavirus cases.</p> <p>It's likely not over yet, either: Cold, wet weather will continue the rest of the week. The Exhibition Hall shelter will stay open through Monday morning.</p> <p>The toll has yet to be totaled. The cold has already killed two people and landed about 15 in Harborview Medical Center for hypothermia and cold-related injuries, but neither of the deceased was likely homeless, according to the county medical examiner, and a spokesperson for Harborview said the 15 being treated are "from all walks of life."</p> <p>The Exhibition Hall severe weather shelter and another one in Pioneer Square, run by a Lutheran nonprofit, have been mostly full each night — on Monday night, when temperatures dropped into the teens, there were more than 200 people between the two. By Thursday night, this shelter almost filled up, packing 147 people in. Other emergency shelters are in City Hall, a Mennonite church in Lake City and an American Legion post in West Seattle.</p> <p>These shelters have likely prevented several deaths, but they've stretched a homeless shelter system already threadbare from coronavirus and a labor shortage. The cold has also forced nonprofits to return to placing many guests in big, open rooms — a way of sheltering people that many of their leaders have tried to swear off because of COVID-19 concerns.</p> <p>Inside the vaulted Exhibition Hall — which before the pandemic hosted fashion shows, galas and book fairs — a hundred mats sit empty between concrete columns, and stacks of blankets sit in the corner. There are 50 cots ready for deployment when the mats run out.</p> <p>"Let's play ball," says Mark Thomas, who's sitting at a check-in table with hot drinks and cloth masks. His long, graying hair flows over a Seahawks hoodie, and around his mask, 14 bedazzled piercings sparkle from his ears to his brow.</p> <p>Thomas normally works from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. at the Salvation Army's Sodo shelter, but this time of year he becomes nocturnal and kicks it up to 15-hour shifts.</p>

He won't leave until 9 the next morning.

Employees like Thomas are worth every dollar to The Salvation Army right now. A labor shortage that's swept the nation has hit homelessness nonprofits — which often pay low wages for tough jobs — especially hard. Salvation Army officials say they raised wages during the pandemic and staffing levels are higher than many organizations, with about a quarter of its jobs in Seattle unfilled.

Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan tried to buttress this sagging workforce at the end of the year by offering up to \$150 a shift to those who come in to work, but the spread of the omicron variant in King County is still being felt. The Salvation Army has seen 40% of staff call out in the last week because of quarantine, vacation or because they simply couldn't get to town in the snow.

"That is astronomical," said Foster, the director of operations. They've put up 18 staff members in Seattle hotels so they could keep coming to work.

Next to Thomas at the check-in table sits Michael Dorsey in a knit blue beanie and a big black jacket. He usually works nights at The Salvation Army because he has a part-time job in office administration during the day.

Through the night, Dorsey and the other staff will constantly remind people to wear masks, and after reminders, people usually will, until they're at their mats.

Although data on new COVID-19 spread among the homeless population is poor, case numbers in King County shelters, encampments and homeless housing haven't yet reflected the surge the rest of the county is seeing. That could be because Public Health — Seattle & King County is not testing at congregate sites unless a confirmed coronavirus case is reported; the agency performed 1,338 tests this month so far, 300 fewer than in November.

Vaccination rates at most Salvation Army shelters in Seattle are between 40 to 50%, though one at Harborview Hall boasts a rate of 75%.

The pandemic and the resulting outpouring of federal and local resources have been good for some homeless people, landing them in hotel rooms or more private spaces in 24/7 shelters where they don't have to leave for the day and can store their things, but [it's also meant fewer indoor spots overall because most of the mats on the floors have disappeared.](#)

That leaves more people outside.

Tuesday night, though, they begin to file in. The first in line, a 35-year-old woman who's been waiting an hour and 20 minutes for the doors to open, walks in wearing a cloth mask. Thomas asks her name. "Leticia Diaz," she says.

Diaz has been homeless on and off for about four years, fleeing domestic violence and struggling with a methamphetamine addiction.

But her spirits are high on this night. She's a month sober, and just spent her first Christmas sober in 26 years. She's been sleeping in a women's shelter at First Presbyterian on First Hill and spending her days at the center for women at Mary's Place, tucked in between Amazon buildings a 30-minute walk away.

"I get offered drugs left and right out there when I'm out," she says. "That's why I like to stay inside."

Diaz was drawn to The Salvation Army shelter because of her faith. But many of the other people in the shelter tonight have had to leave other shelters, Foster said, or "been kicked out because of behaviors, or because there weren't more mental health resources."

"The vast majority of these folks we already know," Foster said.

	<p>When he was out in the lobby earlier, he saw someone The Salvation Army had just housed with a voucher from the state, but the person's partner was going through a mental health crisis and the landlord kicked them out, Foster said.</p> <p>The group tonight though, on the whole, seems glad to be inside, glad they're allowed to bring their pets, glad to be able to bring their significant others and fall asleep holding hands.</p> <p>"Something kept telling me to come here," Diaz says. "I love the little peacefulness and the staff."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/01 Tribal rights: proving Sinixt 'not extinct'
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/colville-tribes-member-defied-canadian-law-to-prove-sinixt-people-were-never-extinct/
GIST	<p>This past summer, Rick Desautel stopped alongside a road near Vallican, B.C., and gave a prayer to all the members of his tribe who had fought for decades for the Canadian government to recognize a simple fact: They still exist.</p> <p>In a landmark decision in April, Canada's Supreme Court overturned a 1956 declaration that the Sinixt, one of the 12 Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, were "extinct." On the surface, the 7-2 ruling simply found Desautel had the right to kill a cow elk in that part of what is now British Columbia, but it has far-reaching implications for other Indigenous people whose ancestral lands have been bisected by the U.S.-Canada border.</p> <p>The first time he returned to the area after the ruling, Desautel said with a laugh, felt like "homecoming week."</p> <p>Desautel said he's been traveling to the ancestral lands on the Canadian side since the 1980s "when I first realized that the Sinixt people lived in that area and walked into those grounds, feeling my ancestral roots."</p> <p>"It's great to go back into your ancestry and see where you came from," he said.</p> <p>In 2010, Desautel and his wife Linda crossed the border into Canada with a plan they had settled on with other Colville tribal members: He would shoot an elk, they would pack it out in accordance with Canadian law — which guarantees hunting rights to members of First Nations recognized by the government — and then he would turn himself in to local authorities.</p> <p>Before Europeans arrived and eventually drew a border along the 49th parallel, the Sinixt lived in what is now southeastern B.C. and northeastern Washington. The border's arrival in the 19th century split that territory in two, leaving some Sinixt people in Canada and the rest in the United States, where they were pushed onto the Colville Reservation.</p> <p>Canada's government recognized the Sinixt, known there as the Arrow Lakes Band, in the early 1900s. But soon after the last Sinixt member known to the Canadian government died in 1953, the government declared them extinct.</p> <p>Meanwhile, many Sinixt people still lived in Washington, separated from much of their traditional territory by an arbitrary border that had existed for a relative blink of an eye in comparison to the thousands of years they had spent on that land.</p> <p>When Desautel turned himself in to the authorities in 2010, it set off a long legal process that led to a B.C. court acquitting him in 2017, ruling that Canada's constitution guaranteed his right to hunt on his ancestral land. An appeals court upheld that decision and in October 2020 it went to the country's highest court,</p>

where Desautel's attorney, Mark Underhill, argued Native people's rights should not be deprived by the forced displacement so many endured along the U.S.-Canada border.

In a phone call Thursday, Underhill said while the full impact of the decision isn't clear yet, he expects it will force both the U.S. and Canadian governments to revisit how they deal with rights of tribal nations along the border.

"I think we'll look back on it as the beginning of the end of the border, at least as we currently know it, for Indigenous peoples on both sides," Underhill said. "I think you will see these concepts of citizenship on both sides of the border fundamentally change over the next 10 years for those cross-border nations."

In far northwestern Washington, for example, the Lummi Nation is seeking to assert its rights to block a major new port development in B.C. that would increase shipping traffic through traditional Lummi territory. The court decision could also affect Indigenous people along Canada's border with Alaska.

While the court decision could not have happened without his carefully planned hunt, Desautel is quick to acknowledge the other Sinixt people who fought for recognition. He traces the movement for Sinixt recognition back to 1989, when he and other members of the Colville Tribes traveled to Vallican to block a proposed highway whose construction displaced the remains of their ancestors. While the road was ultimately built, the protest galvanized activists, including many who didn't live to see this year's victory.

"I just wish that they were here today to celebrate with me," Desautel said.

Since he made that first trip back to his ancestral land this summer, Desautel said he has returned a few more times by himself, but looks forward to going back with Linda and their kids and grandkids once pandemic-related border restrictions are loosened. He plans to climb Frog Mountain, a sacred peak also known as Mount Wilton, next summer.

Underhill acknowledged the group effort that went into the court victory, but he said Rick and Linda Desautel deserve credit for their role in it, not only because they were willing to get arrested and risk imprisonment. While Rick Desautel joked that he wasn't afraid of winding up in a Canadian jail — "I could have used the vacation," he said — he added that the Colville tribal council made a plan to take care of their family if he and Linda couldn't return from their hunt.

"You could see the impact that Rick and Linda had," Underhill said. "Just their presence there and how down-to-earth they were, it's hard to put it in words but it really resonated with the court, and I actually think it was a tremendous factor in our ultimate success that you had these real people there who just wanted to be able to return to their culture and those connections to that land."

The biggest impact of all, Underhill said, will be on all the generations of Sinixt children who won't have to grow up being told they are extinct.

Rick Desautel said he hopes the court's decision is a step forward, "giving us recognition back in our homeland up there in what they call Canada today."

"The impact that it's had I don't think is totally realized yet," he said. "Working through the different court cases that will come up from this here, and the decisions hopefully that will come down from it, will significantly impact the next generation."

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HEADLINE	01/01 Seattle area ski resorts struggling to cope
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/life/outdoors/the-2021-22-ski-season-in-full-swing-but-seattle-area-resorts-are-struggling-to-cope/

The new year has brought new headaches for Seattle-area ski resorts, with staffing shortages and surging visitors leading to new crowd management strategies at Crystal Mountain and growing public discontent over operational struggles at Stevens Pass.

On New Year's Day, Crystal Mountain announced the [return of the reservation system](#) that it deployed during the 2020-2021 season. Effective Saturday, Jan. 8, all skiers and riders will need to make a reservation online to secure their spot for the day. The reservation window opens Tuesday at 9 a.m. through the [Ikon Pass website](#). (Alterra Mountain Company, which manages the Ikon multiresort pass, owns Crystal Mountain.) In an effort to preserve space on the mountain for season pass holders, Crystal will no longer sell day tickets on weekends and holidays going forward. (Day tickets already purchased for weekends later this season will still be honored.)

Crystal made the preemptive move despite relatively light crowds over the holiday week. Cold temperatures and abundant snowfall [translated to superb skiing](#), but road conditions also kept many away. Nevertheless, Dec. 31 saw the mountain's third so-called "parkout," or completely full parking lot, of the season, which forced Crystal's hand.

"We haven't seen the pass holder visitation yet, but we know they're coming," Crystal's marketing director Tiana Anderson told The Seattle Times via phone on Saturday, noting that more Washington residents purchased season passes for this season than last winter. "This is a proactive measure to help prevent continued frustration trying to get to the mountain."

Unlike last season, Crystal is operating at full capacity this winter, which Anderson said translates to around 6,000 reservation slots per day. Pass holders with a valid reservation can still purchase a "friends and family" same-day discounted lift ticket for others in their party who do not have a season pass.

Crystal is also prepared to expand its free round-trip bus service from Enumclaw, which has not yet filled to capacity, to as many as 20 buses per day. Anyone who makes a bus reservation is also guaranteed a mountain reservation that day, even if the mountain reservation system shows no slots available.

One reason that Crystal is feeling the squeeze? Problems farther north in the Cascades at Stevens Pass. Despite abundant snowfall, a staffing shortage at the Vail Resorts-owned ski area has kept significant parts of the mountain closed, including the entire backside and part of the night skiing operation, as well as shuttered two eateries.

Stevens Pass general manager Tom Pettigrew issued a public apology Dec. 24 for the state of affairs. "The truth is, we're dealing with a lot of difficult challenges right now, including the staffing shortages facing everyone in the travel + leisure industry," [he wrote via the ski area's social media accounts](#). "For us, that has impacted our ability to open the mountain the way we know we can, and want to — and I want to apologize to our guests for how that has affected your recent experience."

A Change.org petition called "[Hold Vail Resorts Accountable](#)" alleges mismanagement of the ski area and calls for Vail Resorts to return 60% of the season pass purchase price to customers if problems are not resolved by Jan. 15. The petition has attracted nearly 22,000 signatures as of Jan. 1.

Staffing shortages have also affected Summit at Snoqualmie, which did not run the Rampart and Hidden Valley chairs at Summit East on Jan. 1. "Compared to our neighbors to the north [Stevens Pass], we're doing OK," Summit's Director of Marketing & Sales Karter Riach said.

He described Dec. 31 as an exceptionally busy day, with backcountry enthusiasts and snow play visitors creating scenes reminiscent of [last season's Snoqualmie Pass overcrowding](#). "We have no plans for reservations," Riach told The Seattle Times. "Things could change but we don't want to have reservations for season pass holders." Like Crystal, Summit at Snoqualmie has limited daily lift ticket sales on peak days.

	<p>Crystal Mountain has been 100% open since before Christmas, Anderson said, and they are rooting for their rival to the north to get up to full speed.</p> <p>“The struggles that Stevens is facing are putting more pressure on Crystal,” Anderson said. “We want them to get through their struggles. In Washington, there are more skiers than the mountains can handle. The whole industry needs balance.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/01 Judge blocks Head Start vax mandate
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/judge-blocks-covid-vaccine-mandate-for-head-start-program/
GIST	<p>MONROE, La. (AP) — President Joe Biden cannot require teachers in the Head Start early education program to be vaccinated against COVID-19, a Louisiana federal judge ruled Saturday, handing a victory to 24 states that had sued the federal government.</p> <p>U.S. District Judge Terry Doughty wrote that the Biden administration unlawfully bypassed Congress when ordering that workers in Head Start programs be vaccinated by Jan. 31 and that students 2 years or older be masked when indoors or when in close contact outdoors.</p> <p>Head Start is a federally funded program that promotes education for children under the age of 6 who are from low-income families.</p> <p>Doughty, an appointee of then-President Donald Trump, wrote that the separation of powers is crucial to the country’s founding and quoted former President Ronald Reagan, who said “the nine most terrifying words in the English language are, ‘I’m from the government and I’m here to help.’”</p> <p>“If the Executive branch is allowed to usurp the power of the Legislative branch to make laws, then this country is no longer a democracy — it is a monarchy,” Doughty wrote.</p> <p>Republican attorneys general who were among the 24 states involved in the lawsuit praised Doughty’s decision.</p> <p>“This victory will help ensure that numerous Head Start programs will continue to operate rather than have to fire teachers and cut back services to children,” Alabama Attorney General Marshall said in a news release. “And this win will forestall the nonsensical and damaging practice of forcing masks on two-year-olds.”</p> <p>It was not immediately clear whether the federal government would appeal the decision to the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans.</p> <p>Doughty’s ruling is similar to a Friday ruling in which a federal judge also blocked the Head Start mandate in Texas.</p> <p>Saturday’s ruling affects Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Wyoming and West Virginia.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/01 Bruce Harrell officially Seattle’s new mayor
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/bruce-harrell-officially-becomes-seattles-new-mayor
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - Bruce Harrell on Saturday officially became Seattle’s new mayor.</p> <p>Harrell was sworn in without ceremony last week, and traveled to the White House to meet with President Joe Biden and nine other newly-elected mayors, to discuss the American Rescue Plan.</p>

	<p>"Today, I officially enter office with optimism and excitement. Even in these challenging times, I am energized by what we can achieve for Seattle and each other by working together and leading with our shared values," Harrell tweeted. "Onward – to a new year and to a new direction."</p> <p>Harrell, who grew up in redlined city neighborhood, is Seattle's first Asian American and second Black mayor.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/01 Hospital postpones non-urgent surgeries
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/uw-medicine-postpones-non-urgent-surgeries-due-to-covid-spike
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - A rising number of COVID cases has led UW Medicine to postpone non-urgent surgeries.</p> <p>A spokesperson with UW Medicine tells FOX 13 that they have roughly 65 COVID-19 patients between four hospitals.</p> <p>In a letter to patients, Lisa Brandenburg wrote: "Our physicians and operational teams are reviewing each case and will only reschedule those that can safely be postponed to a later date."</p> <p>At this time, telehealth visits are being encouraged rather than in-person appointments – especially for those suffering from symptoms of COVID-19 including: cough, shortness of breath, fever, chills, muscle pain, sore throat, loss of taste or smell, gastrointestinal symptoms, headache or runny nose.</p> <p>The news comes as UW Medicine is prioritizing testing sites for those with symptoms, or known exposure to a person with COVID-19.</p> <p>Over the past week testing sites were slammed from a rise in demand for tests due to holiday get-togethers, and closures of sites across King, Pierce and Snohomish counties due to winter weather. On top of that, home antigen tests are becoming harder to obtain due to a national shortage.</p> <p>Despite a crunch in testing appointments, positive test rates have been soaring.</p> <p>Dr. Geoffrey Bair, chair of Laboratory Medicine and Pathology at UW School of Medicine told FOX 13 that a site in Auburn saw a positivity rate of 49-percent recently.</p> <p>"Which is just astronomically high compared to where we have been in between surges. We have often seen sites across Seattle at 5-10% positive. And at previous peaks we have seen positive rates at 20-25%," said Baird.</p> <p>As for UW Medicine, visitation is being limited to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission. Beginning on January 3, 2022, patients will be allowed one visitor for one hour during designated visiting hours.</p> <p>Visitors are required to show proof of vaccination, or a negative COVID-19 test within three days of the visit. They will also be required to wear a medical-grade mask at all times.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/30 DOH to follow CDC shorter quarantine rule
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news-brief-newsletter/state-health-department-to-adhere-to-cdcs-shorter-quarantine-time-after-covid-exposure
GIST	<p>TACOMA, Wash. — Despite the increase in COVID-19 cases from the omicron variant, Washington state Department of Health officials said Thursday that they agree with new guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that reduced the number of days for quarantine after a virus exposure from 10 to five.</p>

"I do want to note that this is grounded in science," said Lacy Fehrenbach, deputy secretary for the health department's COVID response. "The majority of transmission does occur early in the course of illness. I think if I remember correctly generally the one to two days prior to onset of symptoms and then in the few days after."

She said that initial reports that omicron's symptoms are less serious were also a factor.

"And so, this transition for shortened isolation and quarantine is grounded in science," she said. "And also helps society keep running, and that is also important in a pandemic."

Some business owners said the shortened quarantine period will be beneficial.

"I think it's definitely going to help us," said Kerri Lonergan-Dreke, who operates Lombardi's Italian Restaurants. "Fortunately, we haven't had a lot of staff with COVID or COVID exposure. But I think we may see more of that as the virus variant continues to spread."

She has restaurants in Mill Creek, Everett and Bellingham and believes the 10-day quarantine period hurt all businesses.

"I mean look at what's happening in the airline industry right now with air travel," she said. "The airports are backed up. We're starting to see more staff call in with COVID exposure. And look, I mean the last two years have been incredibly challenging for businesses and workers, especially in this business."

Although the state Department of Health is adopting the CDC's five-day guidance, the University of Washington Medicine is not.

"What I can tell you is UW Medicine today, in my organization, we have maintained the sort of previous guidance for our own site," said Dr. Geoffrey Baird, a UW Medicine professor and acting chair of Laboratory Medicine and Pathology. "And we are reviewing and considering whether or not we should go along with that."

Another reason the CDC said it wants to lower the number of days is because only one-third of people affected were actually quarantining.

Federal health officials believe five days is more doable for people.

The state health department also announced it is expanding vaccination availability.

State health officials said the agency's decision was backed by science and worth following.

A focus is the mass vaccination site the department operates in partnership with FEMA at the Federal Way Performing Arts Center.

"Hopefully, there is increased access there," Fehrenbach said. "They are providing all three vaccines. And then we also have been working to get as much vaccine as we can into Washington state. We are very challenged this week by the weather."

That has made finding a vaccine shot challenging for some.

"We originally made appointments but the earliest we could get it was February," said Grace Hilsen, who finally scored a vaccination. "I live in North Seattle and he lives in Lynnwood. And my friend lives in Des Moines and she was able to find this appointment."

Mason Joel also was recently vaccinated.

	<p>"Everything was two to three months out before you could maybe get an appointment," Joel said. "But now recently with some of the changes that have been happening with the Biden Administration saying we can go and get more I was able to find this one."</p> <p>A search by KOMO News of the online vaccination shot finder found several appointments available along with multiple appointments available over the next several days.</p> <p>The Federal Way site will be closed New Year's Eve and Day but will reopen Sunday and Monday then moving to the Federal GSA site in Auburn at 2701 C Street SW, opening Thursday January 6th.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/30 DOH: 849,075 cases, 9853 deaths
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/washington-reports-highest-number-of-new-coronavirus-cases
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA, Wash. - The Washington State Department of Health reported its highest number of new coronavirus cases since the start of the pandemic.</p> <p>On Thursday, DOH reported 6,888 new cases. This number is the highest the department has ever reported. The latest record of 6,144 new cases was reported on Dec. 24.</p> <p>The latest numbers bring Washington's total cases since the start of the pandemic to 849,075 cases, 45,381 hospitalizations, and 9,853 deaths.</p> <p>Three of the top 5 days in cases reported throughout the pandemic, were reported in the past seven days.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/31 New laws in effect Washington Jan 1, 2022
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/these-laws-go-into-effect-in-washington-in-2022
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON - Several new laws will be going into effect in Washington state come Jan. 1, 2022. Here's what Washingtonians can expect in the new year:</p> <p>Minimum wage increase On the first day of the year, Washington state's minimum wage will increase to \$14.49 an hour, which is up from the current minimum wage of \$13.69.</p> <p>The federal Bureau of Labor Statistics contributed the increase in the price index to a rise in housing, gas, household furnishings and food.</p> <p>The state minimum wage applies to workers age 16 and older. Under state law, employers can pay 85% of the minimum wage to workers ages 14-15. For 2022, the wage for that younger group will be \$12.32 per hour.</p> <p>Seattle and SeaTac both have higher minimum wages than the state, currently at \$16.69/hour and \$16.57/hour, respectively.</p> <p>Capital gains tax A new capital gains tax on high-profit stocks, bonds and other assets was signed into law in April.</p> <p>It's a 7% tax on the sale of stocks, bonds, and other high-end assets in excess of \$250,000 for both individuals and couples, and is expected to bring in \$415 million in 2023, the first year the state would see money from the tax, which would start in January 2022.</p> <p>Retirement accounts, real estate, farms and forestry are exempt from the tax. Business owners are also exempt from the tax if they are regularly involved in running the business for five of the previous 10 years before they sell, own it for at least five years, and gross \$10 million or less a year before the sale.</p>

When it takes effect, the tax would raise about \$445 million per year. That money would go into the state's Education Legacy Trust Account, intended for child care and early learning programs.

[Several lawsuits, including a legal challenge](#), have been filed to stop the tax. In September, a Superior Court judge [ruled the legal challenge could move forward](#). It's unclear exactly how that will impact the tax at the start of the year.

Single-use utensils and beverage lids

Starting Jan. 1, you'll have to [ask for utensils or condiments whenever you get a food order to-go](#). Restaurants and cafeterias in the state will no longer be able to [automatically include plastic knives, forks and spoons](#), as well as chopsticks, straws, drink lids, sauce containers or sauce packets.

The bill was passed in an effort to reduce packaging waste and to meet Washington's goal of achieving 100% recyclable, reusable, or compostable packaging in all goods sold in Washington by Jan. 1, 2025.

Ban of Native American mascots in schools

Gov. [Jay Inslee](#) has signed a bill to [ban the use of Native American names, symbols and images as school mascots, logos and team names](#) at most public schools in Washington.

"This bill will end the [disrespectful use of Native American imagery](#) in our schools," Inslee said in April. Under the measure, school districts would have some time to phase out the mascot, team name or logo, but they were required to select a new mascot by Dec. 31 to take effect by the end of the 2021-22 school year.

Starting in 2022, they would not be able to purchase uniforms that include the old mascot or name.

The ban [does not apply to schools located within Native American areas](#) or to schools in counties adjacent to Native American areas, as long as the nearest tribe is consulted and authorizes the use of the name.

On pause: Longterm care payroll tax

One of the more controversial laws would have taken effect on Jan. 1, 2022. The mandatory tax, signed into law in 2019 through the Long Term Care Trust Act, will use a 0.58% payroll tax to pay up to a \$36,500 benefit for individuals to pay for home health care and an array of services related to long-term health care including equipment, transportation and meal assistance.

However, Gov. Jay Inslee and Washington Democratic legislative leaders [announced an agreement to push back the new WA Cares payroll levy](#) as they address issues with the new long-term care program.

During the pause, [employers won't incur penalties and interest](#) for not withholding those taxes from worker wages.

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HEADLINE	12/31 Experts warn against over-vaccinating
SOURCE	https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10358555/Experts-warn-dishing-fourth-jabs-spring-pointless.html
GIST	<p>The US, the UK and other major economies could be on the brink of over-vaccinating people in the fight against Covid, experts say.</p> <p>Israeli officials have already announced their intentions to embark on dishing out another round of booster jabs, meaning both the US and UK will eventually face pressure to follow suit even though both nations have insisted there are no plans to administer fourth doses yet.</p> <p>But scientists argue that rolling out vaccines every three-to-four months simply isn't 'doable' and may not even be necessary because of Omicron, which some believe will speed up the process of endemicity and consign days of sky-high hospitalization and death figures to history.</p>

And they called for more data on dosing gaps between boosters before pressing ahead with plans to administer fourth jabs. Some experts claim the benefits of extra jabs are minimal because their primary purpose - preventing deaths and hospitalizations - has barely waned after a year and several Covid variants, effectively meaning boosters are adding to an already high base level immunity.

Professor Ian Jones, a virologist at the University of Reading, said descriptions of Omicron being a 'natural vaccine' were right.

The logic behind the argument is that as Omicron is highly transmissible but milder than other variants, it can give an immunity boost without causing as much serious illness, with some data suggesting a combination of infection than vaccination providing the best type of immunity in the long-run.

Future variants 'may be even more mild', Professor Jones told MailOnline, adding that the need for healthy adults to get top-up jabs could soon recede. Instead of doling out jabs every few months, he said annual boosters for the vulnerable ahead of the winter would be 'more feasible'.

Professor Lawrence Young, a virologist from Warwick University, insisted vaccines should protect against severe illness for much longer than they do against getting infected or becoming ill, suggesting that an annual booster for the elderly and vulnerable groups will be enough to thwart off Covid in the coming years.

Dr Simon Clarke, a microbiologist at the University of Reading, admitted he 'can't see' governments pushign out Covid vaccines every three months for much longer. He said: 'Although after two-and-a-half months immunity starts to wane, that doesn't mean it drops below being extremely effective.'

But he told MailOnline that the only way to measure the long-term effectiveness of the boosters was to wait and see. 'We can only get that long term data over the long term, there's no crystal ball with this. We just don't know what the optimum strategy is,' he said.

Other epidemiologists have said repeated and multiple outbreaks Covid each year might necessitate boosters every four to six months, which they branded a 'daunting prospect'.

But even though data shows vaccines are less effective against Omicron, they are nowhere near redundant.

Real-world data shows efficacy levels of the booster vaccine at stopping people getting symptoms plummet to around 40 per cent after just 10 weeks.

But two jabs still drastically cut the risk of hospitalization and death, even against Omicron, as the body's immune system still retains some ability to help fight off virus even after some waning immunity. A third dose will bolster that protection even further, experts insist.

It means a fourth dose may not be necessary yet for the entirety of the UK and could see ministers only advised to dish out extra doses to the elderly and immunocompromised in the coming months.

For this reason some experts have called for caution about dishing out another round of vaccines so quickly.

One of the UK Government's own advisers warned it would be impossible to 'defeat' Covid with vaccines if everyone needed a top-up every three months. It would see the UK's national Health Service have to dish out the equivalent of up to 50million jabs every 90 days, or around 550,000 every day. This would put the cost of an annual vaccination drive in the region of £4billion (around \$5.4billion) , based on one jab being priced at around £20 (\$27) per dose — similar to Pfizer.

But government ministers may sign off on plans to dish out universal Covid jabs — which experts hope will offer better protection and hold up against variants that emerge in the future — but they aren't

expected for another 18 months, England chief medical officer Professor Chris Whitty told MPs earlier this month.

Vaccine makers have been quietly working on as polyvalent Covid jabs but they are all in early development and way off clinical trials.

Israel has already approved the use of fourth doses of Covid vaccines to vulnerable people, such as those with weakened immune systems, over fears that their immunity may already be fading.

Currently, the US has not indicated any plans regarding additional boosters, with health officials saying more data is needed on the protection improvement potentially offered by a fourth dose.

Dr Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases said last week that it was too 'premature' to be talking about a fourth dose.

'One of the things that we're going to be following very carefully is what the durability of the protection is following the third dose of an mRNA vaccine,' he said.

'If the protection is much more durable than the two-dose, non-boosted group, then we may go a significant period of time without requiring a fourth dose.

'So, I do think it's premature, at least on the part of the US, to be talking about a fourth dose.'

UK experts have also urged caution over offering fourth jabs, saying more data is needed on the long term protection offered by the booster.

The rollout of a second set of boosters is being examined by experts on the UK's Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI).

Professor Anthony Harnden, deputy chair of the JCVI, said: 'We need to see more data. We are in different circumstances to Israel and we need to see more data on waning immunity and vaccine effectiveness against hospitalization.'

Professor Jones said: 'The vaccine response clearly wanes but it is not clear if the boosted response will wane in the same way or at the same rate.'

Covid death rates in [South Africa](#)'s [Omicron](#) wave were just a quarter of levels seen during previous surges, real-world data suggests.

Researchers examined records of 450 patients hospitalised in the City of Tshwane since the extremely-transmissible variant took off in the country.

Their survival rates were then compared against nearly 4,000 patients hospitalised earlier on in the pandemic.

Just 4.5 per cent of patients hospitalised with Covid in the last month died from the virus. For comparison, the rate stood at around 21.3 per cent earlier in the pandemic.

The findings, in the [International Journal of Infectious Diseases](#), also revealed ICU admissions were a quarter of the rate seen in previous waves, and patients' average hospital stay was halved.

The City of Tshwane is an authority situated in Gauteng — the first province to fall victim to Omicron.

Scientists behind the research said it shows 'a decoupling of cases, hospitalisations and deaths compared to previous waves'.

Omicron could be a 'harbinger of the end' of the darkest days of the pandemic and could usher in the virus's endemic phase, the team wrote.

Patients involved in the latest study were, however, much younger, which may have skewed the results.

But the academics, from South Africa's National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD) and the University of Pretoria, aren't the first to show the virus is milder.

Other real-world studies from the UK and South Africa already reported that patients who catch the strain are up to 80 per cent less likely to be hospitalised.

He also told MailOnline that he didn't think offering a regular booster to keep immunity up was feasible or effective.

'Boosting every 10 weeks or every time a new variant appears to be on the rise is not doable and in consequence I think we need some sort of grading system for new variants to ensure we act appropriately and practically,' he said.

Professor Jones said annual top-up jabs for the vulnerable ahead of the peak winter illness season, December to February, would make more sense.

If all adults would need one depended on how Omicron continues to develop, Professor Jones said.

'If Omicron is an attenuated strain already on its way to endemicity then later versions may be even more mild and the need for vaccination for an otherwise fit adult might recede,' he said.

'You have to remember that making you very sick is no good to the virus at all, all it "wants" is to transmit, so virus evolution will tend towards a less severe strain which you will pass around as you will struggle on with work etc much as we do for common colds.'

On Omicron generally Professor Jones said descriptions from others of the ultra-infectious variant being a 'natural vaccine' were right.

He said that while any Covid variant boosts immunity the fact Omicron was highly transmissible yet milder worked to help boost population immunity.

'Whatever version you were infected with your immunity would be boosted,' he told MailOnline. 'That mild bit suits us because it means we can get immunity without, or with much less, risk.'

However, he warned against any 'chickenpox' style parties where people intentionally try to catch Omicron, saying we needed to protect people who could get severely ill from the virus.

'You have to be careful here not to stretch it to things such as chickenpox parties because there will always be a vulnerable minority and to encourage infection puts them at risk,' he said.

Hopes of Omicron ushering in the end of the pandemic stage of Covid were sparked by a South African study into Covid death rates in the nation's [Omicron](#) wave. It showed fatalities were just a quarter of levels seen during other surges.

Researchers examined records of 450 patients hospitalized in the City of Tshwane, in the 'ground zero' province of Gauteng, since the extremely-transmissible variant took off in the country. Their survival rates were compared to nearly 4,000 patients hospitalized earlier on in the pandemic.

Just 4.5 per cent of patients hospitalized with Covid in the last month died from the virus. For comparison, the rate stood at around 21.3 per cent earlier in the pandemic.

Scientists from South Africa's National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD) and the University of Pretoria, who carried out the research, said it shows 'a decoupling of cases, hospitalizations and deaths compared to previous waves'.

Omicron could be a 'harbinger of the end' of the darkest days of the pandemic and could usher in the virus's endemic phase, the team wrote in the International Journal of Infectious Diseases.

Commentators around the world have latched on the findings and claimed Omicron could act as natural vaccine making the virus endemic to the population.

One of these was a health official for the Indian state of Maharashtra, Dr Pradeep Awate who told the Press Trust of India, that although Omicron was spreading faster than Delta, there had been few hospitalizations.

'If this happens, Omicron will act as a natural vaccination and may help in its (Covid's) progression towards the endemic stage,' he said.

But Dr Clarke cautioned against the idea of labelling Omicron a 'natural vaccine'.

'The immunity we've had from other variants doesn't protect all that well against Omicron, so there is no reason to think it works in the other direction,' he said.

This is despite a new study from the Africa Health Research Institute showing blood taken from people infected with omicron recorded a 4.4-fold increase of antibodies when exposed to the the Delta version of the virus.

In contrast other studies delving into the topic of cross-variant immunity showed antibodies made in response to Delta reacted poorly to Omicron.

Dr Clarke added that just because Omicron was milder did not mean it, or other Covid variants, would remain so, adding: 'The idea that viral evolution is a one-way street to the common cold is absolute bull****.'

On the idea of more boosters and how often, Dr Clarke emphasized the need for more data before we know time gap between more Covid jabs.

He said there will be an 'optimum' gap between doses but 'we just don't know what it is yet', adding that it 'won't be good' if jabs are done too far apart or close together.

Dr Clarke also advised against general predictions on how Covid boosters are going to be rolled out in 2022, highlighting how despite an Omicron jab being in development, it might fail, or need two doses similar to the initial Covid jab.

However he did say that boosters being used to keep immunity against infection topped-up through increased antibodies may be the preferred strategy going forward by the Government not wanting to impose restrictions and minimize disruption.

'Population wide vaccination will drive down transmission, it won't eliminate it, but it will drive it down across the population,' he said.

'And if you have lots of people who have more than the sniffles and are ill enough not to go to work, there is massive damage to public services and an economic slowdown.'

Professor Young also said while data had suggested a drop in booster effectiveness against Omicron infection, the outlook for longer term protection from against severe disease was still good.

'Preliminary data suggests that vaccine effectiveness against symptomatic infection with Omicron drops by between 15-25 per cent after 10 weeks,' he said.

'Thus those older individuals who were boosted at the beginning of the booster campaign in mid-September may not be as well protected from symptomatic infection.

'However, all current data indicates that booster jabs will protect from severe disease and that this should last for at least several months.'

He said the broad hope is that this protection against severe disease will eventually mean an annual booster jab for the elderly and other vulnerable groups will be sufficient to protect them from a severe Omicron infection in the coming years.

Professor Young also highlighted how immunity was a complex system, with different segments like antibodies rising in the short term when people get vaccinated. While other more difficult to measure parts like T-cells provide longer term protection.

'The good news is that recent studies have shown that both vaccination and natural infection induce a strong and sustained T-cell response to Omicron and other variants,' he said.

'This might be the key to longer term protection and the need for less frequent boosters.'

There have also been concerns about over-vaccinating people in the UK when so many in other parts of the world are unvaccinated.

Professor Adam Finn, a UK government vaccine adviser, previously told the [BBC](#) that over-vaccinating people, when other parts of the world had none, was 'a bit insane, it's not just inequitable, it's stupid'.

Professor Young also highlighted that it might be more important to help other countries boost their vaccine uptake rather than offer all Britons another booster, to stop new variants from forming.

He highlighted Africa, where Omicron was first identified and almost certainly emerged, as one particular example.

'Virus variants will continue to be generated as long as the virus is allowed to spread particularly in countries where vaccination rates are low,' he said.

'This emphasizes the need to control the pandemic at the global level as well as locally and that it is in all our interests to support the roll out of vaccines across the world.

'In a situation where around 73 per cent of people in wealthy and middle-income countries have been vaccinated, this includes those who have had one, two or three doses, whereas only 12 per cent are vaccinated in Africa, we have to consider the value and luxury of additional booster doses if such vaccines are not widely available.'

Jeffrey Shaman, an infectious disease modeler and epidemiologist in New York has also highlighted the need to tackle the Covid pandemic on a global scale.

He said: 'We may find ourselves in a different kind of endemic equilibrium in which boosting is needed every four-six months and highly effective therapeutics are needed to limit severe disease. All this would need to be available globally and equitably. This is a daunting prospect. And psychologically challenging.'

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HEADLINE	12/31 Experts: weeks away from turning point
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/31/health/us-coronavirus-friday/index.html

(CNN) Just a day after the US reported its [highest average daily Covid-19 case number](#), the country shattered that record again Thursday, with an average of 355,990 new infections reported every day in the past week, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

But as the latest surge sweeps across the US, [pushing cases](#) and [hospitalizations](#) to unprecedented levels [and altering daily life once again](#) for many Americans, experts warn we're still weeks away from a possible turning point.

"Given the size of our country and the diversity of vaccination versus not vaccination, that it likely will be more than a couple of weeks (until Covid-19 cases peak)," Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's leading infectious disease expert, told CNBC this week. "Probably by the end of January."

And roughly 62% of the country [is fully vaccinated](#), according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Only about 33.4% of fully vaccinated adults have also gotten their booster vaccines -- a shot that experts say is now critical in helping further protect against severe illness from [the dangerous variants](#) circulating.

The [Omicron variant](#) -- the most contagious strain of the virus so far -- is spreading like wildfire across the world, with [several European countries](#) reporting their highest ever case counts.

In the US, multiple states are seeing their highest Covid-19 case and hospitalization numbers ever, with some governors calling in [the National Guard](#) for help.

New York state reported more than 74,000 new cases Thursday, according to the [governor's office](#), breaking its single-day record of reported infections, while hospitalizations rose by almost 20% since Monday.

"Get vaccinated, get boosted, mask up, and avoid large indoor public gatherings when possible," New York Gov. Kathy Hochul said in a statement.

Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson announced Thursday his state also set a case record, with more than 4,970 residents testing positive in a day. Maryland, reporting more than 10,870 new cases Wednesday, beat a state record that was set just days earlier and also reported its highest Covid-19 hospitalization rate this week.

Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine announced this week he was deploying 1,250 members of the state's National Guard on the same day the state reported its highest Covid-19 hospitalization number. Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp also announced the deployment of 200 troops in the same week that six major health systems across the state announced they saw 100% to 200% increases in hospitalizations.

And things will only get worse before they get better, one expert said.

"We know that over the next five to six weeks we're going to continue to see transmission of this virus throughout this country, much like a viral blizzard," said Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota. "With that, we are going to see a perfect storm in our health care settings."

Child Covid-19 hospital admissions reach record-high

With more virus spreading in the country, [more children are getting sick](#) and hospitalized -- more than at any other point in the pandemic.

An average of 378 children were admitted to the hospital with Covid-19 on any given day over the week that ended December 28, according to data published by the CDC and the US Department of Health and Human Services.

That's more than a 66% jump from the previous week and an all-time record, beating the previous one set at the end of August and early September, when an average of 342 children were being admitted to hospitals.

The vast majority of the children being admitted to hospitals are unvaccinated, Dr. Lee Savio Beers, president of the American Academy of Pediatrics, told CNN Thursday.

"At my own hospital, where I work and practice here in DC at Children's National, about half of our hospitalizations ... are children under five," Savio Beers said. "I think it's just so important for us to remember that we're protecting ourselves, but we're also protecting those little ones who aren't yet eligible for vaccination."

There is no vaccine for children younger than five years old. And while a vaccine for this young group is expected, it likely [won't be available until mid-2022](#).

"I'm thinking it's going to be at least a couple of months, possibly longer," Dr. Megan Ranney, a professor of Emergency Medicine and associate dean at the School of Public Health at Brown University, told CNN Thursday.

"For those parents of the under-five group, an important thing to know is that most of the kids who have been hospitalized with Covid were also co-infected with other things like RSV or flu. So please go get your kid a flu vaccine, make sure that you and the rest of the family are adequately protected and have your kid wear a mask when they're out in public," she added.

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) [is also expected to broaden eligibility](#) for Pfizer Covid-19 vaccine boosters to children ages 12 to 15 in the coming days, according to a person familiar with the agency's plan.

When asked this week about boosters for adolescents and younger teens, CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky told CNN that the FDA "is looking at that right now."

"Of course the CDC will swiftly follow as soon as we hear from them and I'm hoping to have that in ... the days to weeks ahead," Walensky said.

The expansion will make a big difference for many families, Ranney told CNN, and will better protect the young population who will be eligible for the extra dose.

"This is a big step forward, especially with kids going back to school," Ranney said.

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HEADLINE	12/30 Record number children hospitalized: Covid
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-pandemics-seattle-centers-for-disease-control-and-prevention-75a48388d6ca85ad88de300f32bfdec6
GIST	<p>SEATTLE (AP) — The omicron-fueled surge that is sending COVID-19 cases rocketing in the U.S. is putting children in the hospital in record numbers, and experts lament that most of the youngsters are not vaccinated.</p> <p>"It's just so heartbreaking," said Dr. Paul Offit, an infectious-disease expert at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. "It was hard enough last year, but now you know that you have a way to prevent all this."</p> <p>During the week of Dec. 22-28, an average of 378 children 17 and under were admitted per day to hospitals with the coronavirus, a 66% increase from the week before, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported Thursday.</p>

The previous high over the course of the pandemic was in early September, when child hospitalizations averaged 342 per day, the CDC said.

On a more hopeful note, children continue to represent a small percentage of those being hospitalized with COVID-19: An average of nearly 10,200 people of all ages were admitted per day during the same week in December. And many doctors say the youngsters seem less sick than those who came in during the delta surge over the summer.

Two months after vaccinations were approved for 5- to 11-year-olds, about 14% are fully protected, CDC data shows. The rate is higher for 12- to 17-year-olds, at about 53%.

A study released Thursday by the CDC confirmed that serious side effects from the Pfizer vaccine in children ages 5 to 11 are rare. The findings were based on approximately 8 million doses dispensed to youngsters in that age group.

Dr. Albert Ko, professor of epidemiology and infectious diseases at the Yale School of Public Health, noted that the low vaccination rate is, in part, a matter of timing: Younger children were not approved for the vaccine until November, and many are only now coming up on their second dose.

Offit said none of the vaccine-eligible children receiving care at his hospital about a week ago had been vaccinated, even though two-thirds had underlying conditions that put them at risk — either chronic lung disease or, more commonly, obesity. Only one was under the vaccination age of 5.

The scenes are heart-rending.

“They’re struggling to breathe, coughing, coughing, coughing,” Offit said. “A handful were sent to the ICU to be sedated. We put the attachment down their throat that’s attached to a ventilator, and the parents are crying.”

None of the parents or siblings was vaccinated either, he said.

The next four to six weeks are going to be rough, he said: “This is a virus that thrives in the winter.”

Aria Shapiro, 6, spent her 12th day Thursday at Phoenix Children’s Hospital. She tested positive for COVID-19 after getting her first dose of the vaccine Dec. 17.

Aria, who is considered “medically fragile” because she has epilepsy, suffered prolonged seizures in the hospital, and a breathing tube had to be put down her throat at one point, though she has since improved.

“We lived our life in for two years to prevent her from getting COVID, finally went for the vax, and the one thing that we didn’t want to happen happened,” said her mother, Sarah Shapiro. “It wasn’t enough time for her body to build antibodies. She did end up getting COVID.”

Overall, new COVID-19 cases in Americans of all ages have skyrocketed to the highest levels on record: an average of 300,000 per day, or 2 1/2 times the figure just two weeks ago. The highly contagious omicron accounted for 59% of new cases last week, according to the CDC.

Still, there are early indications that the variant causes milder illness than previous versions, and that the combination of the vaccine and the booster seems to protect people from its worst effects.

In California, 80 COVID-19-infected children were admitted to the hospital during the week of Dec. 20-26, compared with 50 in the last week of November, health officials said.

Seattle Children’s also reported a bump in the number of children admitted over the past week. And while they are less seriously ill than those hospitalized over the summer, Dr. John McGuire cautioned that it is early in the omicron wave, and the full effects will become apparent over the next several weeks.

New York health authorities have also sounded the alarm.

The number of children admitted to the hospital per week in New York City with COVID-19 went from 22 to 109 between Dec. 5 and Dec. 24. Across all of New York state, it went from 70 to 184. Overall, almost 5,000 people in New York were in the hospital with COVID-19.

“A fourfold increase makes everybody jump with concern, but it’s a small percentage,” Ko said of the New York City figures. “Children have a low risk of being hospitalized, but those who do are unvaccinated.”

Dr. Al Sacchetti, chief of emergency services at Our Lady of Lourdes Medical Center in Camden, New Jersey, likewise said vaccinated children are handling the omicron outbreak extremely well.

“It makes a big difference in how these kids tolerate the disease, particularly if the child’s got some medical issues,” he said.

COVID-19 deaths have proved rare among children over the course of the pandemic. As of last week, 721 in the U.S. had died of the disease, according to data reported to the American Academy of Pediatrics. The overall U.S. death toll is more than 800,000.

Almost 199,000 child COVID-19 cases were reported during the week of Dec. 16-23, the pediatrics group said. That was about 20% of the more than 950,000 total cases recorded that week.

While many of these children will recover at home, they may have contact with others who are at much greater risk, said Dr. Jason Terk, a pediatrician in North Texas. He cared for a 10-year-old boy with COVID-19 who managed the disease well, but his father got sick and died, he said.

“The death of a parent is devastating, but the toxic stress for a young person in this situation is difficult to measure,” he said.

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HEADLINE	12/30 Covid positivity rate soars at testing sites
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/covid-19-positivity-rate-soars-near-50-at-some-seattle-area-testing-sites-straining-capacity/
GIST	<p>UW Medicine on Thursday said it was struggling to keep up with coronavirus testing demand and would begin to limit appointments to only those with COVID-19 symptoms or known exposures — a change prompting new questions as the omicron variant surges through the state.</p> <p>The continued strain on the region’s testing capacity could mark a shift in the battle against the pandemic, as more Washingtonians rely on at-home rapid tests, rather than those in labs where samples can be genetically sequenced to monitor for new variants.</p> <p>The state might soon have to start thinking of new surveillance strategies, the state’s chief science officer, Dr. Tao Kwan-Gett, said in a state Department of Health briefing Thursday.</p> <p>Further complicating matters, some confusion is emerging nationwide over how to best limit viral spread as federal health experts release more information about the efficacy of rapid tests and new isolation and quarantine guidelines.</p> <p>UW Medicine cited an “astronomically high” positivity rate that’s slowing its testing process and prompting the move to limit eligibility at its sites. Meanwhile, three of the health care system’s 12 testing clinics will close all together: in Ballard, at Seattle City Hall and at Lake Sammamish State Park. The changes go into effect Tuesday.</p>

After that, people without symptoms who want to get tested before travel or gatherings, for example, will no longer be able to make appointments at UW testing sites.

The high positivity rate — measuring more than 40% at some South King County locations — is creating a challenge in the testing system and slowing scientists' ability to parse out which samples are actually positive, Dr. Geoff Baird, chair of laboratory medicine and pathology at UW Medicine, said in a news briefing Thursday morning.

"This isn't an announcement that I'd like to make and we're going to try and get back to our normal testing capacity as soon as we can," Baird said.

While he acknowledged the temporary change will likely be inconvenient for many people, he added there "really aren't too many ways around this."

"We are in the midst of the worst public health disaster in the history of humanity in terms of raw numbers of people who have been impacted and people who have died," he said. "So it's important to go back and remind ourselves that this isn't really an inconvenience. This is a serious public health problem right now."

Limits of "pool testing"

UW scientists normally opt for a "pool testing" system — common throughout the country — to speed up the process, which means they take four or five samples from testing sites, extract a small portion of each, then mix them together in one vial for testing.

"If that sample was negative, all of those samples would be considered negative because the test is extremely sensitive," Baird said. "So we would really have done the work of four or five tests with just one test. It was a way to increase capacity."

He continued, "The problem when the positive test rate gets very high, though, is that all of the pools are positive. If one or two of them are ... positive, we'd still have to go back and test all four individually to see which [individual sample] was positive — so we can't do pooling anymore."

That significantly decreases capacity, he said.

At King County's UW collection site in Auburn, the COVID positivity rate was 49% earlier this week, Baird said. In the past, scientists have seen 5% to 10% positivity rates at Seattle sites in between surges, and at previous peaks positive rates have been around 20% to 25%, he added.

The change will last until scientists have confirmed samples' positivity rate has fallen back down to an average of below 10% to 15%, Baird said.

Overall, most recent data shows the positivity percentage is about 25% — while test sites in South King County are between 40% and 50%, others in the Seattle area are much lower — so the rate will need to go down by about half for labs to "operate at full strength," Baird said.

"It was expected, but it's still been the highest we've ever seen in our region," he said.

On Thursday, the state reported [another record-breaking daily number of COVID infections](#) at 6,888, topping the most recent high [recorded on Christmas Eve last week](#). Hospitalizations remain far lower than during previous peaks, though they've recently started to creep back up in some parts of Western Washington, [state health leaders said last week](#).

Anyone who has an appointment before Tuesday will still be able to hold onto their time slot regardless of symptoms or exposure.

"[The restrictions] could change in a matter of days," Baird said.

Avalanche of tests

Baird said the UW Medicine lab has generally been receiving 10,000 to 15,000 samples per day for most of December, with a pre-Christmas peak at 20,000 tests per day. If scientists want to get results out within 24 hours or less, they'll have to scale back capacity to about 8,000 to 10,000 tests per day, Baird said.

"We could accept more tests, but we wouldn't get to them in a meaningful time," he said. "... In the last few days, we've gotten to the point where our turnaround times have sometimes exceeded two days, and medically speaking, a COVID test that's not back for several days just isn't terribly meaningful because someone could go on and spread the virus and they wouldn't have the important information they need to make the decision about whether or not to quarantine or limit contact, isolate, etc.

"We are making this decision because we want to keep the medical value of the testing intact," he added.

Baird pointed to staffing shortages as another large reason why the positivity rate is posing such a problem.

"Just like many of our other industries in medical and biomedical fields are having hiring crises right now, so are we," he said.

UW locations have performed more than 4 million COVID tests since the beginning of the pandemic.

Baird reminded the public Thursday that "testing is one tool in the tool belt" for fighting viral spread, but that vaccines, distancing and limiting social gatherings are perhaps more important.

"COVID is not transmitted because of a lack of testing," he said. "COVID is transmitted by human behavior with people interacting and being in close contact."

Still, he acknowledged that the health care system will not be able to keep track of the total number of infections as accurately as long as appointments are limited.

But, he said, the city and state have long known infection numbers are being undercounted because not everyone who gets sick gets a test. In addition, those who test positive with an at-home rapid test don't always report their results to public health agencies.

While the positivity rate is still a "very good surrogate for what's out there," Baird said, a lack of total available samples — and therefore more limited sequencing — could become a problem.

Other testing options

While the UW Medicine changes leave many Washingtonians at odds over how to control asymptomatic spread in the near future, Lacy Fehrenbach, the state's deputy secretary for COVID response, reminded the public Thursday there are still other ways to get tested — including through mobile test sites, public health department clinics and at-home testing.

For example, King County, in hopes of supporting high testing demand, plans to distribute 300,000 coronavirus at-home test kits to community groups, health centers, libraries and other congregate locations beginning in early January, [County Executive Dow Constantine announced this week](#).

The move aims to bolster community supply of at-home rapid tests, which Walgreens, CVS and Bartell Drugs continuously report are being snatched up at a rate that's outpacing supply.

While new research from the Food and Drug Administration [shows rapid tests "may have reduced sensitivity" at detecting the omicron variant](#), a National Institutes of Health director added this week that even with reduced performance, rapid tests "will still pick up infections and ... help individuals get treatment sooner."

	While additional information about testing and omicron spread emerges, Baird said Thursday that lab scientists will continue to monitor positivity rates every day and hopefully reopen to full capacity soon.
	“We have been doing an awful lot to help out,” he added. “This is just to get us through this next surge.”
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HEADLINE	12/30 SEA airport cancels most flights in world
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/more-snow-in-seattle-means-more-cancellations-and-delays-at-sea-tac/
GIST	<p>For the second day in a row on Thursday, Seattle-Tacoma International Airport earned a dubious distinction: Sea-Tac had more canceled flights than any other airport on the planet.</p> <p>Thanks to another round of snow and continued pandemic-induced staffing problems, more of the same is likely Friday. By 7 p.m. on Thursday, airlines had already canceled 95 flights that had been slated for Friday.</p> <p>“There is nothing we can say that will give travelers back lost time or canceled plans,” Port of Seattle spokesperson Kate Hudson said in a statement. “We understand it is aggravating, especially at a time when we’ve already seen so many plans affected now and in the last year.”</p> <p>Airport officials had forecast that Thursday would be the second busiest day of the holiday rush at Sea-Tac, when they expected 136,000 travelers to pass through. Instead, airlines canceled 301 arrivals and departures at Sea-Tac, more than a quarter of all of Thursday’s scheduled flights and the highest number of any airport in the world, according to the website FlightAware.com.</p> <p>Friday’s cancellations brought Sea-Tac’s total to more than 1,530 since Sunday, when heavy snow on top of ongoing staffing issues began snarling domestic air travel, according to the flight tracking site.</p> <p>Thursday’s cancellations brought more frustration for many travelers who had already been hit by cancellations that were starting to surge even before Christmas.</p> <p>Randi Evans, a Seattle native now living near Oakland, California, has been stuck in Seattle with her husband and three children since Sunday, when their Alaska Air flight was canceled.</p> <p>After hours of waiting and another cancellation, the couple managed to rebook a flight — for Thursday.</p> <p>“It just seems like such a mess,” Evans said.</p> <p>All over the country, airlines have faced staffing shortages due to coronavirus infections and quarantines.</p> <p>COVID infections among flight attendants are rising across the country as the omicron variant spreads, said Sara Nelson, international president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, in an emailed statement.</p> <p>“Staffing remains tight as workers are hesitant to pick up voluntary overtime due to disruptive passengers, COVID concerns, and COVID-test positives during the busiest travel period of the year,” said Nelson, whose union represents 50,000 attendants. “We have negotiated holiday incentives to help with operational challenges but there’s only so far you can stretch people.”</p> <p>Although staffing issues have struck the industry as a whole, the problems have been exacerbated at airports beset by heavy winter weather.</p> <p>At Sea-Tac, crews are working hard to keep runways clear and other operations running smoothly, Hudson said. The airport, which usually handles about 950 flights a day this time of year, has just 10 de-icing stations that waiting planes can use when not at a gate.</p>

	<p>The airport has prepared terminals to handle stranded passengers. Restaurants and retailers stocked up for high demand, Hudson said, and some shifted to 24-hour operations.</p> <p>“We have handed out hundreds of blankets this week to guests who have had long stays in the terminal waiting for a postponed flight,” Hudson said.</p> <p>Still, the main advice for travelers hasn’t changed. “If you do not need to travel, consider delaying,” Hudson said. “If you do need to travel, come prepared for crowds and the potential for change.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/30 Omicron roils Australia Covid exit strategy
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/omicron-roils-australias-exit-from-zero-covid-strategy-11640861284?mod=lead_feature_below_a_pos1
GIST	<p>ADELAIDE, Australia—Australia’s shift to living with Covid-19 after keeping cases near zero for much of the pandemic was based on a bet that a high vaccination rate would limit severe illness and hospitalizations.</p> <p>On both scores, this country of 26 million people is doing well. Evidence so far suggests the Omicron variant, which accounts for most new infections in Australia, generally leads to less-severe disease than earlier strains of the virus. But Australia’s health system is ailing as a surge in Covid-19 cases overwhelms the test-and-trace regime that has been a key defense up to now.</p> <p>Queues for PCR tests are so long in some cities that officials now only want people with Covid-19 symptoms or who live with infected individuals to get swabbed. State governments, unable to keep up with demand, are scrapping testing requirements for interstate travel, once viewed as a guardrail to stop outbreaks from spreading across the country.</p> <p>Pathology services are taking longer to process tests, risking mistakes when they try to speed up. A Sydney laboratory this week wrongly told hundreds of people that they didn’t have the virus, effectively clearing them to mix socially. It blamed the move to manual data processing from an automated system to expedite the release of negative results.</p> <p>“Frankly, if you have to wait for eight hours in a queue and then 72 to 96 hours to get a result, it’s not fulfilling any useful public health function,” said Paul Kelly, Australia’s chief medical officer.</p> <p>Australia’s experience shows the limits of a reopening plan that pits a high vaccination rate against a rapidly spreading version of Covid-19, even if Omicron is milder than earlier variants. It offers a preview of the risks that other countries, including many in Asia, could face when they shift to allowing the virus to become endemic from responding to outbreaks with restrictions such as lockdowns and travel bans.</p> <p>On Thursday, Australia overhauled its strategy. Now, close contacts of Covid-19 cases would mostly be defined as people from the same household, reducing the number of people required to isolate, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said. The government said it would also provide at-home testing kits to some people, including in nursing homes, but stopped short of making them available to everyone for free.</p> <p>“We cannot have hundreds of thousands of Australians or more taken out of circulation based on rules that were set for the Delta variant,” Mr. Morrison said. “We need rules for the Omicron variant.”</p> <p>However, the Australian Medical Association criticized the government’s decision to narrow the definition of close contacts, fearing it will lock in high transmission rates. “We will miss so many more cases,” said Dr. Omar Khorshid, the association’s president.</p>

Covid-19 cases in Australia remain low by global standards, with around 360,000 cases and 2,224 deaths since the pandemic began. The U.S., by comparison, has had more than 53 million cases and 820,000 deaths, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University.

Australia [began to relax restrictions](#), including the lifting of lockdowns in Sydney and Melbourne, not long before Omicron was first detected overseas. This month, the national government allowed skilled migrants and students [to travel to the country freely](#) if they are vaccinated. In Sydney, authorities let unvaccinated people enter most premises. For a short time, they also scrapped requirements to wear masks indoors and check in at many venues.

Health officials say cases are doubling every 2-4 days because of Omicron. In New South Wales state, home to Sydney, cases have risen in the past two months from about 300 a day to more than 12,200 despite more than 93% of people aged 16 and above having two vaccine doses. Cases have also hit a daily record in states including Victoria and South Australia.

Adrian Esterman, an epidemiologist and biostatistician at the University of South Australia, said Australia's comparatively low numbers of Covid-19 cases should have given the country an advantage in managing Omicron's spread.

Instead, authorities squandered that opportunity, partly by being slow to allow people to use at-home tests and by not having enough testing kits, evidenced by empty shelves in supermarkets and pharmacies, he said.

Officials say there is plenty of capacity in intensive-care units to handle people very sick with Covid-19. Still, the number of healthcare workers in isolation in New South Wales roughly tripled to 1,364 in the week before Christmas as cases climbed.

South Australia's Ambulance Employees Association, a labor union, said some ambulance crews are relying on help from police and university students to meet demand, but up to 35 emergency calls went unattended overnight Tuesday to Wednesday.

Many states have pivoted back to restrictions from earlier in the pandemic, sometimes just days after saying there was no turning back. Restaurants and cafes in New South Wales again have to limit the number of customers they can serve inside. Steven Marshall, South Australia's premier, plans to limit nonurgent surgery to guard against any rise in Covid-19 hospitalizations.

Still, officials have largely resisted calls to cancel New Year's Eve celebrations, such as the firework displays on Sydney Harbour, which typically draw large crowds.

Omicron's rapid spread is pressuring health systems elsewhere in the world. Many U.S. hospitals, drugstores and testing facilities said they were operating with reduced staffing because workers were out sick or in isolation or quarantine.

When testing centers become overloaded they can deter people with mild symptoms from checking if they have Covid-19, especially at Christmas and New Year, which fall in Australia's summer when holiday travel is popular.

Kerri Sackville, a Sydney-based author, said her 22-year-old son had attempted to get tested at two centers early last week but was turned away because they were too busy. Nursing a sore throat and with hopes of traveling over Christmas, he tried another drive-through site on Dec. 23 where he was swabbed. It took six days for the result to come back positive, spanning all of Christmas.

"If it hadn't been [positive], we would have been holed up all week for nothing," said Ms. Sackville, who tested negative. "A lot of people would just say 'I'm not staying locked up anymore.' "

HEADLINE	12/31 Oil outlook blurs after demand roars back
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/omicron-blurs-oil-outlook-after-demand-roars-back-11640941952?mod=hp_lead_pos4
GIST	<p>The fast-spreading Omicron variant is clouding the outlook for oil markets after a rapid recovery in demand pushed prices to their highest levels in years.</p> <p>Oil marched higher for much of 2021. Demand lifted as economies revved up, while producers in the Middle East and elsewhere kept millions of barrels of crude each day in the ground. Brent-crude prices, the global benchmark, climbed 53% to \$79.32 a barrel.</p> <p>The rally delivered bumper earnings at companies such as Exxon Mobil Corp. and Chevron Corp., making energy the best-performing sector of the S&P 500 this year through Dec. 23. Miners including Glencore PLC and Freeport-McMoRan Inc. also enjoyed share-price run-ups driven by advances in commodities from coal to copper.</p> <p>Drivers are feeling the pinch. Average national prices for regular gasoline have risen to about \$3.29 a gallon from \$2.25 a gallon a year ago, according to AAA, though they are down from about \$3.40 before the emergence of the Omicron variant of Covid-19. Energy contributed to the fastest pace of consumer-price growth in decades this fall, prompting President Biden to release crude from the strategic reserve.</p> <p>Crude prices had reached their highest levels since 2014 before governments restricted travel to stall Omicron in late November. They have seesawed since, leading traders to wrestle with two questions: Will Omicron knock oil off its upward trajectory? Or will demand resume its advance, perhaps testing the world's ability to produce crude?</p> <p>"We've learned that demand can come back with a vengeance," said Francisco Blanch, head of commodities and derivatives research at Bank of America. He thinks Brent prices could reach \$120 a barrel in 2022, barring a jump in Covid-19 hospitalizations or a major outbreak in China.</p> <p>The world is still using less oil than it did on the eve of coronavirus, consuming about 96.2 million barrels a day this year, according to the International Energy Agency. But demand has snapped back faster than production, and the energy adviser figures demand will reach pre-coronavirus levels of over 100 million barrels a day in the third quarter of 2022.</p> <p>The longer-term path of demand for—and production of—fossil fuels is another unknown. World leaders in November reached a deal that aims to accelerate emission cuts. The IEA's forecasts for oil demand over the next three decades hinge on the extent to which governments follow through on climate commitments.</p> <p>Energy traders and analysts say Omicron won't deliver the kind of shock to oil prices unleashed by the first coronavirus shutdowns, when U.S. crude futures briefly turned negative. One reason is that demand for oil from the petrochemicals industry is offsetting a decline in jet-fuel consumption. Giving oil demand another boost, a surge in natural-gas prices in Europe and Asia encouraged utilities to burn fuel oil and coal to generate electricity.</p> <p>Investors have recently sold oil to lock in profits, pushing prices lower than justified by the likely effect of Omicron on demand, said Rebecca Babin, senior energy trader at CIBC Private Wealth U.S. "We've had a pretty amazing year in energy," she said.</p> <p>Drops in demand could help build a buffer of supply. Cuts by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and Russia have drained stockpiles in members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, a group of mainly rich countries, below the five-year average. There are doubts about the cartel's ability to unwind those curbs following a decline in spending on production during the pandemic.</p>

	<p>“There are countries that simply don’t have spare capacity,” said Amrita Sen, founding partner of consulting firm Energy Aspects. Meanwhile, she added, the chances of a revamped nuclear deal that lifts sanctions on Iranian oil exports appear to be fading.</p> <p>One country that is struggling to pump oil: Nigeria, Africa’s largest supplier, whose crude plays an important role in balancing international markets. It produced 1.29 million barrels of crude a day in November, 360,000 barrels fewer than its OPEC quota, according to the IEA. The agency says operational problems, sabotage and pipeline leaks might hamper a recovery of output.</p> <p>Drilling activity in the U.S., however, is picking up. Leading the way are private producers that have scooped up market share from publicly traded rivals under pressure from investors to deliver dividends instead of splashing money on wells. That, coupled with rising output in countries including Canada and Brazil, should sate demand for oil, said Edward Morse, head of commodities research at Citigroup.</p> <p>Some banks forecast another run-up in oil prices in the coming years caused by underinvestment in fossil fuels. Citigroup’s Mr. Morse is skeptical, saying the increased adoption of electric vehicles, among other factors, will limit demand growth beginning in 2023 or 2024.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/31 China falls short on trade deal promises
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/beijing-fell-short-on-trade-deal-promises-creating-dilemma-for-biden-11640946782?mod=hp_lead_pos6
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON—Beijing’s commitment to step up purchases of U.S. goods and services under a 2020 trade pact expires Friday with China expected to miss its targets by a wide margin, creating a dilemma for the Biden administration as it calibrates a response.</p> <p>The White House could potentially reinstate certain tariffs that were cut as part of the trade deal, but that could backfire if China cut back U.S. purchases or took measures against American companies doing business there.</p> <p>Alternatively, the U.S. could ignore the shortfall, which could send a signal to Beijing that it won’t face consequences.</p> <p>How the U.S. responds is being watched closely by U.S. businesses, many of which want smooth relations with China to ensure continued access to its giant market. Others including some domestic manufacturers take a harder line, citing Chinese government support for favored industries and saying the U.S. needs to nurture its own supply chains.</p> <p>Trade analysts say it’s unlikely President Biden would escalate tensions with China as he seeks to tame inflation and advance his domestic agenda. But they also point out that President Biden has yet to articulate a clear strategy for dealing with Beijing.</p> <p>“The Biden administration is tied in knots by their own lack of clarity about how they evaluate the problem and the potential solutions,” said Scott Kennedy, a senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. He noted that similar conflicts have arisen in other policy areas, including the administration’s worker-centric trade policy and climate goals.</p> <p>The White House and the U.S. Trade Representative’s office didn’t respond to requests for comment on the Chinese purchase shortfall.</p> <p>In a meeting with reporters in November, U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai said her team was discussing the shortfalls with its Chinese counterparts.</p> <p>“We are optimistic in our work that the effort we are putting into this particular exercise will lead to an outcome that is better than if we hadn’t put the effort in,” Ms. Tai said.</p>

A spokesman for the Chinese embassy in Washington said China's purchases of U.S. goods were hindered by the economic downturn triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

"China has worked hard to overcome the multiple negative impacts of the pandemic, global economic recession and disrupted supply chains, and promoted the joint implementation of the agreement," spokesman Liu Pengyu said.

Under the so-called Phase One trade deal [signed in January 2020](#), China agreed to increase its purchases of U.S. goods and services by \$200 billion over 2017 levels during a two-year period ending Friday, with specific targets set for manufactured goods, farm products, services and energy.

Then-President Donald Trump hailed the pact as a "momentous step," but skeptics questioned how Beijing would be able [to ramp up purchases so sharply](#). Sen. Chuck Schumer (D., N.Y.) branded the deal "a temporary and unreliable promise from China to purchase some soybeans."

With the two-year period coming to a close, data shows that China has increased its U.S. purchases, but far below the targets set in the trade deal.

Based on trade data through November, China was 17% short on its agriculture goal, 41% short on the manufacturing goal, and 62% short of the energy goal, according to calculations from Chad Bown of the Peterson Institute for International Economics, far beyond the ability of last-minute deals to fill the gap in the window specified by the agreement.

Data for services trade isn't available on a monthly basis, but annual data showed a 32% drop in U.S. service exports to China for 2020.

The trade deal includes a dispute resolution mechanism that Mr. Biden could use to compel China to make additional purchases. Under this mechanism, the U.S. could ultimately apply new tariffs or restore some tariffs it reduced as part of the deal (even though it left most tariffs in place to help ensure compliance).

But raising tariffs would increase costs to U.S. companies that import Chinese goods such as clothing and electronics. Those companies pay the tariffs and often pass on higher costs to U.S. consumers.

The U.S.-China Business Council, a trade group that represents American companies with large Chinese operations, urged the U.S. in a letter last month to dial back tariffs and refocus negotiations on issues that were omitted from the 2020 trade deal, such as pushing China away from relying on state-owned enterprises and subsidies to private enterprise.

Jamieson Greer, the former chief of staff to U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer, who led the Trump administration's trade negotiations, said U.S. exports to China were still strong in 2020 and 2021, despite missing the targets.

"It's preferable to have high targets and achieve historic exports like we did in 2020 and 2021 thanks to the Phase One deal, as opposed to hoping that China will simply start buying what we are selling based on market principles," said Mr. Greer, now a partner at King & Spalding LLP.

With farm products in particular, China has ramped up U.S. purchases, helping to bolster prices for American farmers who had been hit hard by falling prices during the U.S.-China trade war.

U.S. beef, pork and poultry producers exported record amounts to China in 2020 or 2021, while other farm exports were near records. In 2020, for example, China imported \$14.1 billion of soybeans, just shy of the \$14.2 billion record set in 2016.

Even so, the \$57.4 billion of farm goods China bought from 2020 through November 2021 fall well short of the \$73.9 billion needed to reach the target.

For manufactured goods, China pledged to buy \$210.7 billion in the two-year period. As of November, it has bought \$117.8 billion.

The biggest miss of all was in energy, such as crude oil and natural gas. The trade deal called for China to purchase \$67.7 billion; as of November, it had bought \$24 billion, on pace to fulfill just 37% of the target.

Historically, the U.S. steered clear of purchase agreements and instead sought to persuade countries to lower structural trade barriers that hindered private enterprises.

The Trump administration tried a different tack, saying a tougher stance was needed given China's use of government subsidies to allow strategic industries to undercut American competitors, its tolerance for intellectual property theft, and its complex barriers to prevent foreign competitors from gaining a foothold in many industries.

That stance included putting new tariffs on Chinese imports in 2018, which eventually climbed to cover nearly \$370 billion worth of goods. The 2020 trade deal was in some respects simply a cease-fire, as most tariffs remain in effect.

Going forward, Mr. Kennedy of CSIS contends the U.S. should push China toward a market-oriented economy—and not set purchase targets that effectively reinforce Chinese state control.

"This experiment was a failure," Mr. Kennedy said of the trade deal. "It empowers all the wrong parts of the Chinese system that we want to disappear. It was a disaster and I hope that we learn the right lessons and never go there again."

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HEADLINE	12/31 Renounce citizenship stuck with it for now
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/31/americans-seeking-renounce-citizenship-stuck
GIST	<p>In recent years, Michael has come to regard the United States, the nation of which he has been a citizen all his life, as an abusive parent.</p> <p>"I can acknowledge my past association with that person while at the same time wanting to keep future association to a minimum," he said.</p> <p>Michael – the name is false as he requested anonymity to avoid being inundated with hate mail – found his disaffection with his native country reach crunch point in 2020. The chaotic end of the Donald Trump era combined with the inequities exposed by the Covid pandemic made him despair of being an American.</p> <p>"Coronavirus made me realize that in the US, if you're not a member of the moneyed elite you're left to fend for yourself with virtually no help from the federal government," he said. "The farcical presidential campaign made me realize that I don't want to be a member of a society in which my vote is made irrelevant by gerrymandering or the electoral college."</p> <p>And so Michael decided to renounce his US citizenship. Having moved to Finland 10 years ago, he would break the ties that officially bound him to a country whose values he no longer recognised.</p> <p>That's when Michael's troubles really began. He discovered that along with thousands of other US citizens living abroad, he was caught in a Kafkaesque trap.</p> <p>For almost two years, since the pandemic struck in March 2020, most US consular missions around the world have suspended their expatriation services for those wishing to give up US citizenship. The US embassy in London, the largest of its sort in western Europe, announces on its website that it is "currently unable to accept appointments for loss of nationality applications" and is unable to say when services will resume.</p>

The US state department says giving up citizenship requires a face-to-face interview with a government official, and that it is too risky given coronavirus.

Delays have led to a growing mountain of disgruntled citizens. By some calculations, there may be as many as [30,000 people](#) among the 9 million US citizens living abroad who would like to begin the renunciation process but can't.

Joshua Grant is one of them. He was born and raised in Selma, Alabama, until he moved to Germany when he was 21 to learn the language.

He has been there ever since. He lives in Lower Saxony and married a German citizen last year. Grant, 30, feels ready to acquire German citizenship, but under German law he must let go of his US passport. Easier said than done.

He submitted a pile of paperwork to the US embassy in July 2020. Nothing has happened. He has written emails to the embassy staff, with no reply.

He contacted the office of US senator from Alabama Richard Shelby. They passed him on to the state department, which in turn passed him back to the bureau of consular affairs, which mentioned the pandemic.

"It's very taxing. My whole life in Germany is on hold," he said. "It's funny: people in Germany tend to see the US as a liberal country where the rule of law was established, but I can't even find anyone in the US government to talk to."

Nine US citizens abroad who have found themselves unable to give up their nationality are now suing the state department in a federal court in Washington. [The suit](#), brought on the plaintiffs' behalf by the French-based group [Association of Accidental Americans](#), likens the situation to feudal times.

"The US appears intent on preventing its citizens from exercising their natural and fundamental right to voluntarily renounce their citizenship," it says.

Some people want to give up US citizenship because the government has been making the burden of being an American more onerous for those abroad. In 2010 the Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act (FATCA) was passed, requiring foreign banks and other financial institutions to report on any clients they suspect of being American to the IRS.

The US is also one of only two countries (the other is Eritrea) that tax people on their citizenship rather than where they live. That forces Americans abroad to declare their global income to the IRS, with possible tax implications.

The impact of these burdens is reflected in [the number](#) of people who renounce each year. Between 2000 and 2010 it remained relatively steady at less than 1,000 people, but after FATCA came in, the numbers rose sharply to a peak last year of almost 7,000.

Some of the would-be renouncers are "accidental Americans", having acquired citizenship because they were born in the US though they have lived elsewhere all their lives.

That label could be applied to the UK prime minister Boris Johnson, who was born in New York but has not lived in the US since he was five. Johnson [renounced his citizenship](#) in 2017, having said he was outraged a few years earlier by having to pay the US tax authorities for gains on the sale of his London home.

	<p>Marie Sock, the first woman to stand as a presidential candidate in the Gambia, was forced to pull out of the race recently after she failed to get any response to her request to renounce her US nationality from the US embassy.</p> <p>She explained in a video posted on Facebook that under Gambia election law, presidential candidates must be sole Gambian nationals.</p> <p>James – also not his real name – was born in Texas but has not lived in the US since he was four. He now lives in Singapore.</p> <p>He became disillusioned when he learned that because his son was born outside the US he would not be eligible for US citizenship, and yet because of James’s citizenship he would be treated as if he were a US taxpayer. That struck him as a modern form of taxation without representation.</p> <p>“The double standards really annoy me,” he said.</p> <p>For the past year he has been trying to get through to an official who will help him renounce his citizenship, without success.</p> <p>“I never asked for US citizenship, and now I’m not even allowed to give it up.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/31 Wildland firefighters at home, trauma holds
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/31/i-thought-i-was-broken-when-wildland-firefighters-head-home-trauma-takes-hold
GIST	<p>Asad Rahman woke up feeling like someone had punched him in the face. It was the winter after one of his first seasons as a wildland firefighter and he’d battled a blaze that had claimed the lives of six other firefighters. The stress left Rahman grinding his teeth at night until his jaw ached.</p> <p>It would be years before Rahman could acknowledge the symptoms of strain. He’s not alone.</p> <p>Now that another wildfire season has come and gone, firefighters who spent months in the trenches are returning home. Along with the familial problems caused by their prolonged absence and the financial stresses some will face during a season without work, the off-season can bring simmering mental health struggles to the surface.</p> <p>Downtime away from the rush of firefighting and the camaraderie in the camps can be the perfect opportunity for stress to rear its head, says Rahman, who has spent 36 years in the field and now serves as a battalion chief for the Bureau of Land Management.</p> <p>“We are in this work-mode and we are adrenaline junkies and it is really hard to come down,” Rahman says. “You’re under so much constant danger all summer that your system is on a constant state of alert. And it’s a crash when you come off of that – an absolute crash.”</p> <p>The cumulative effects of the perilous and prolonged assignments show up in higher rates of alcohol abuse, divorce and sleep deprivation. First responders are also 10 times more likely to contemplate or attempt suicide than the general public and mental health-related deaths now outpace line of duty fatalities. But for years, the toll trauma takes on first responders has been buried behind a culture of stoicism that’s persisted in the profession.</p> <p>Over the last three decades, Rahman has faced more danger, more fatalities, more fear and the relentless trauma of bearing witness to the devastation wildfires leave in their wake. But “it was always, suck it up and go forward. Just rub some dirt on it and keep going”, he says.</p>

It comes at an enormous cost. Six of Rahman's friends have died by suicide. They are among thousands of first responders who struggled silently under the building pressure as fires become more frequent, more dangerous and more difficult to contain, adding a devastating new dimension to an already taxing line of work.

Pressures of being a public 'hero'

After two consecutive record-breaking seasons sandwiching the Covid crisis, Dr Mynda Ohs, a mental health clinician who works with first responders, is concerned that this winter could be one of the worst for mental health. "As soon as we settle down and they can come out of work brain – oh man", she says. "It's going to hit."

Ohs has spent years working with wildland firefighters, but she also knows their plight from personal experience. Her husband and son both work in the field. In 2020, her husband was deployed for 61 straight days. "He came home and he was a shell of a man," she says. It took months before he started acting like himself.

"The off-season can be very difficult for first responders," says Jeff Dill, a former fire captain who founded the Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance, an organization dedicated to helping emergency workers navigate the emerging mental health crises in their field.

Dill cites what he refers to as "cultural brainwashing" – the public's reliance on a hero narrative that diminishes firefighter vulnerability and reinforces the stigma many feel about seeking help – as a key obstacle to creating more openness around the issue.

The result has been deadly.

Dill tracks the rising suicide toll on firefighters and EMT crew members, a grim tally that previously went uncounted. He validates the numbers himself and coordinates support groups for loved ones grappling with the loss. So far this year, 81 firefighters and EMT workers have been counted. Between 2015 and 2020, his counts included 818 men and women. Dill believes his data only reflects about 65% of the actual number.

"We do it to remember them but also to understand the reasons why," he said, adding that "these are not numbers – these are the faces and names of my brothers and sisters and the families that they left behind."

He's found that ruptures in family relationships after long assignments is a top trigger. "[Wildland firefighters] are gone for months and when they come back they are strangers."

A hard job that's only getting worse

Tony Martinez, a Cal Fire captain who has spent 28 years working for the state agency, said the work has undergone a profound change in recent years. The intensity of the modern fire season, combined with a continuous crunch on resources, has created a cycle that both creates more strain and drives people away from the profession.

"I have people telling me they don't ever want to go on another fire again – and these are guys who are only a third of the way through their career," he says. "From the things they have seen, close calls, stress of being on duty for weeks and months on end, and worried about if their family will still be there or not – that was never a thing before."

That's also why Martinez, who comes from a family of public servants, says he hopes his two teenage sons will break with tradition. "We have a major mental health issue right now," he adds. "I only see that as the weeks and months and years go by, that increase – and I don't think the public has any idea."

A federal wildland firefighter, who asked to remain anonymous out of fear of retribution from his employer said he's considered ending his career, mostly because of the impact it has on his young family. "You come home, after being gone for two or three weeks and it's a dumpster fire at your own house," he

said. “Everyone is stressed out, my kids haven’t seen me, I am stressed out, my wife is stressed out because she’s been a single working mom – it just gets to the point where it’s not worth it for me to go on these fires.”

Federal firefighters rely on hazard and overtime pay to supplement their small wages and survive through the off-season and that, he said, also incentivizes crews to push past their limits. Colleagues have refused care, declined important surgeries, and denied themselves the rest and recuperation they need.

“In the last five-10 years the fires have gotten so much more intense,” he said. “And you couple that with the low pay and the low staffing – now people just can’t afford to do the job. It’s so stressful.” Federal agencies, including the US Forest Service have struggled to retain qualified candidates and with each new empty seat, the strain grows.

A wakeup call and push for solutions

Officials are beginning to heed the call. Joe Biden oversaw temporary pay-increases to ensure no firefighter made less than \$15 an hour. The \$1tn infrastructure bill also includes language to permanently increase salaries, improve job titles, minimize hazards and establish essential mental health programs. Separate legislation, passed as part of the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2022, grants federal firefighters housing stipends and funds programs that provide peer-support, stress management, mental health leave, and mental health professionals with trauma expertise.

Advocates still want to expand on these improvements and ensure that the changes will stick. Another bill – named Tim’s Act for Tim Hart, a smokejumper who died fighting a blaze in New Mexico this year – aims to go further. The act, introduced in October, includes provisions to guarantee mental health leave, create career transition funds and expand stress management programs that have been successful at helping first responders cope.

For Hart’s wife, Michelle, the issues tackled by the bill are extremely personal. She witnessed Tim push himself through pain and fatigue to do one of the most dangerous jobs – parachuting into fires too difficult to reach from the ground – in order to earn enough overtime and hazard pay to get through the off-season.

“You can tell them until you are blue in the face that they have to take classes about mental health and recognize depression and suicidal tendencies in their friends and co-workers and utilize the programs – but if they know that their family’s welfare is dependent on them getting 1,000 hours of overtime, there is no way in hell they are going to take a break,” said Michelle.

That’s why this year was supposed to be Tim’s final year as a firefighter. He and Michelle were going to start a family, but that dream ended on 2 June. Michelle got the call she had always dreaded and rushed to be by her husband’s side as he was airlifted to a hospital. Tim didn’t look like himself. His face was swollen. His leg was badly broken. Staples tracked across his head.

“The way I recognized it was him was his feet were out,” Michelle said through sobs. “It was the only part of his body that still looked like him, that wasn’t broken and swollen. His perfectly pale, baby-soft feet, because they were always in socks.”

Tim spent nine days in the hospital before he was taken off life support. Michelle was there with him, holding his hand and stroking his head.

“It’s important for people to understand how hard this is – and that it’s not just me,” says Michelle, who has since committed to preserving her husband’s legacy by pushing for systemic change. “This is happening to the people who are putting their lives on the line for their country.”

Asad Rahman, the battalion chief, is also heartened that, along with the legislative changes, the stigma is starting to shift. While he’s continued to fight fires, for the last 15 years he’s been part of a peer support network designed to foster the trust needed to help firefighters heal. He now serves as a lead.

	<p>He likened the agencies to a big ship, one that's difficult to turn, but expressed hope that the culture is changing. The US Forest Service, which employs more than 10,000 firefighters, has brought on clinicians trained in trauma counseling. The Bureau of Land Management, the agency Rahman works for, has initiated pre-season discussions with its wildland firefighters in order to encourage a culture of openness.</p> <p>"People who had years and years of trauma are now getting the tools they need to live normal lives," he says. Mindfulness, meditation and connections to clinicians who specialize in working with firefighters have been game-changers, Rahman says, adding that he's hopeful everyone – from rookies to retirees – will receive better trauma training.</p> <p>Rahman has benefited from the shift himself. Five years ago he was diagnosed with PTSD – 31 years after he'd started his career. Now, as he prepares to retire in the new year, he credits the culture-change with saving his life and is excited about his future away from fire.</p> <p>"I get emotional thinking about it because it was a turn of the tide to have that support and to know that your feelings – the anger, the rage, the frustration, the hurt, depression – all of that was a normal response to what you encountered," he says. "I didn't know it was normal. I thought I was broken."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/29 China 'brain control' warfare work revealed
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/29/pla-brain-control-warfare-work-revealed/
GIST	<p>The Commerce Department imposed sanctions on Chinese technology companies and announced recently that China's military is engaged in dangerous work related to "brain control" warfare research.</p> <p>The announcement of the sanctions provided limited specific details of the work by China's Academy of Military Medical Sciences and 11 related Chinese research institutes. Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security said only that the academy and its affiliates are using "biotechnology processes to support Chinese military end-uses and end-users, to include purported brain-control weaponry."</p> <p>However, three reports by the People's Liberation Army obtained by Inside the Ring shed light on the depths of China's brain warfare research and show that it has been underway for several years.</p> <p>The translated 2019 reports discuss developing brain control weaponry as part of what Chinese officials call the "intelligentization" of warfare.</p> <p>According to one of the reports, advances in science and technology are leading to upgrades in methods and the ability to subdue enemies. "War has started to shift from the pursuit of destroying bodies to paralyzing and controlling the opponent," said the report headlined, "The Future of the Concept of Military Supremacy."</p> <p>"The focus is to attack the enemy's will to resist, not physical destruction," it stated.</p> <p>Brain science is being used to extend warfare in the sphere of human consciousness "causing the brain to become the main target of offense and defense of new concept weapons," the report added.</p> <p>"To win without fighting is no longer far-fetched," it stated, quoting ancient strategist Sun Tzu's maxim.</p> <p>The report, which was published in the official military newspaper PLA Daily, also asserted that China is merging four major technology fields for military purposes: nano, bio, information and cognition.</p> <p>The intended result will be enhanced individual capabilities. "Future human-machine merging will revolve around the contest for the brain," the report said. "The two combatant sides will use various kinds of brain control technologies and effective designs to focus on taking over the enemy's way of thinking and his awareness, and even directly intervene in the thinking of the enemy leaders and staff, and with that produce war to control awareness and thinking," the report said.</p>

A second Chinese report, also from 2019, disclosed that brain-machine interface is part of Beijing's plan for the development of intelligentized warfare. The second report said "interactive intelligentization" will involve "direct control of machines using thoughts through mature brain-machine interface."

Fused intelligentization is also being studied and involves integrating humans and machines toward the goal of creating enhanced human physiological and cognitive capacities.

A third report published by the PLA revealed that the China Electronic Technology Group is working on "brain confrontation" technology for warfare.

Among its various research focuses are "brain control technologies, such as measuring neuronal activity in the brain and translating neuro-signals into computer signals, establishing uni-directional or bi-directional signal transmission between the brain and external equipment," the third report said.

Research also is being conducted on "neuro-defense" technology such as "leveraging electromagnetic, biophysical, and material technologies to enhance human brain's defense towards brain-control attacks," it said.

One brain enhancement technology involves wearable equipment that stimulates or manipulates brain electrical activities. Another is the use of brain-implanted microchips or other computer interfaces that enhance brain functions.

In sanctioning the Chinese institutes, the Commerce Department said the research activities are "contrary to U.S. national security and foreign policy."

The other institutes hit with sanctions include China's Institute of Health Service and Medical Information; the Institute of Radiation and Radiation Medicine; the Institute of Basic Medicine; the Institute of Hygiene and Environmental Medicine; the Institute of Microbiology and Epidemiology; the Institute of Toxicology and Pharmacology; the Institute of Medical Equipment; the Institute of Bioengineering; the Field Blood Transfusion Institute; the Institute of Disease Control and Prevention; and the Military Veterinary Research Institute.

The 11 institutes have been added to the Commerce blacklist called the Entity List.

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HEADLINE	12/31 TV news shows return to Covid isolation
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/media/2021/12/31/tv-news-covid-distance-isolation-winter/
GIST	<p>There was a time when a permanent return to television news normal seemed at hand. It was June 14, 2021, and the cast of the the Fox News panel show "The Five" could not have been more excited. "It's like the first day back at school," Greg Gutfeld said then, welcoming back his fellow panelists to the show's discussion table after 15 months of convening remotely due to the coronavirus pandemic.</p> <p>The mood was a bit more somber last week, when panelist Jesse Watters grudgingly acknowledged a return to distanced punditry and the Brady-Bunch effect that comes with it. "So, I think we all have to acknowledge here: we're in boxes," said Watters.</p> <p>Amid the massive spread of the coronavirus across the United States, television news programs have been nudging back towards the way things were in the spring of 2020, when hosts and anchors either worked from home or — more commonly, this time around — isolated in individual studios.</p> <p>"Don't adjust your calendars," CNN anchor Alisyn Camerota wrote on Instagram this week. "No, it's not [early 2020] again but, yes, I am back in my own hermetically-sealed studio as we wait for this omicron wave to pass. Hope you're staying positive and testing negative."</p>

It's a disappointing development for an industry that relies on face-to-face interactions to generate dynamic, watchable television. And it's not going over well with some hosts.

"We don't want to be in boxes," Watters told the Fox News audience on Dec. 22. "We hate being in boxes. We resisted being in boxes. We were told to be in a box out of an abundance of caution, just to get us through the holidays."

The shift happened "very quickly," a television news executive, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment publicly, said. "We see that the world is changing again."

Amid the outbreak of a highly transmissible virus, rotating guests into a studio to discuss the news in-person carries obvious risks. On the Dec. 15 episode of CNN's "New Day," anchor Brianna Keilar sat several feet away from several guests she interviewed throughout the show. Two days later, Keilar went on Twitter and announced that she was experiencing coronavirus symptoms. (She said she had received three vaccine doses and was grateful for the protection they were probably providing against serious illness.)

"It's about to be a problem," said a CNN insider who spoke on the condition of anonymity to speak candidly, referring to the riskiness of in-studio interaction amid a deluge of cases. "It's feeling very much like March 2020 and not almost January 2022. Everyone's going to have to re-evaluate now."

On Sunday, the CBS News morning show "Face the Nation" hosted an in-person panel discussion, but ABC's "This Week" did not. "Fox & Friends" made a triumphant return to the show's "curvy couch" in May after all three hosts got their vaccinations — but was back "in three different locations" last Wednesday, Brian Kilmeade told viewers, blaming government regulations in New York.

CNN, perhaps more than any other network, was hit hard by the first wave of the pandemic, with anchor Brooke Baldwin out sick for several weeks in April 2020 and returning to tell CNN viewers that her experience with the coronavirus was "like going to hell and back." Chris Cuomo, who was fired by CNN earlier this month, chronicled his brutal battle with the coronavirus in testimonials for viewers, ending with a theatrical exit from his basement quarantine.

CNN now mandates that employees must be vaccinated to work in offices; over the summer, the network fired three employees for violating the policy. With the explosion of cases following the arrival of the omicron variant, CNN president Jeff Zucker on Dec. 18 sent a memo advising non-essential employees to stay away from the office, echoing guidance other networks have given to their employees.

"We will also be making some changes to studios and control rooms we are using to help minimize the number of people in our spaces," Zucker said in the memo. Right now, the vast majority of CNN's shows are produced in individual studios that reduce the number of personnel needed to put programs on the air, a network representative said, and no anchors are broadcasting remotely — a big change from last year.

Some MSNBC anchors and hosts are broadcasting from their normal studios but practicing social distancing, while the majority are working remotely from various locations, a network source said.

At ABC News, guests now appear remotely rather than coming to the studio. The network's late-morning talk show "The View," which is particularly dependent on in-person banter between co-hosts, has had a rough go of it.

In late September, panelist Whoopi Goldberg made a "historic announcement" that Vice President Kamala D. Harris would make her first in-studio television interview appearance a few days later. Then two hosts clocked positive coronavirus tests (which turned out to be false positives, the show said), were removed from the set mid-show, and Harris appeared remotely instead.

Last month, former "The View" panelist Jedediah Bila was forced to appear on the show remotely because she is not vaccinated, leading to a heated discussion about vaccine mandates.

	<p>The recent surge in cases has come at a particularly bad time for news networks, which are already down many top broadcasters who are taking time off during the holiday season. On air, “there’s a lot of faces you’ve never seen,” the network executive said.</p> <p>Some broadcasters, like the flamboyant CNBC host Jim Cramer, have tested positive for the coronavirus but kept broadcasting — albeit from home. Holding up three positive antigen tests for coronavirus for viewers to see, the triple-vaccinated Cramer said last Monday, “I feel so good — I feel like I should go for a run today.”</p> <p>News anchors and hosts, like many U.S. workers, initially welcomed the flexibility that working from home provides. Dana Perino, the former White House press secretary who is now a Fox News staple, talked publicly about the benefits of broadcasting from a spare room in her Jersey Shore beach home.</p> <p>There are downsides to remote broadcasting, including delays and technical mishaps. Last week, during “The Five’s” first episode back in “boxes,” network contributor Harold Ford Jr.’s backdrop went black as he spoke.</p> <p>“Hopefully, we’ll be back to normal table situation when we return from [the] holidays,” Watters said on the broadcast.</p> <p>But that might not happen. On Tuesday, the 7-day average for coronavirus cases in the United States hit a record high.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/31 Most destructive fire in Colorado history?
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/12/30/colorado-grass-fire/
GIST	<p>BOULDER, Colo. — A wind-fueled grass fire in Colorado burned hundreds of homes in a matter of hours and forced thousands to evacuate Thursday, officials said, as flames rapidly spread through a region that has seen an unusually dry December.</p> <p>Whole neighborhoods were engulfed in flames as the fire advanced through Superior and Louisville, two towns about eight miles outside Boulder. In the Sagamore subdivision, 370 homes were believed lost, Boulder County Sheriff Joe Pelle said, while another 210 were feared destroyed in another part of Superior. Several businesses in a Target shopping complex were also burned. Authorities also ordered citizens in Meadow View, a community in between Denver and Boulder, to evacuate.</p> <p>“We’re potentially talking about over 500 homes,” Pelle said. That is likely to make it the most destructive fire in state history, according to local tallies.</p> <p>Earlier in the day, the National Weather Service warned the situation was “life-threatening” — urging residents of Superior and Louisville to immediately leave. The towns have a combined population of over 34,000, and the evacuations triggered frantic escapes and long traffic lines during the height of the holiday season. Later in the day, Gov. Jared Polis (D) told people observing the fires to stop clogging roads and make way for first responders.</p> <p>There were no immediate reports of deaths, but officials warned that it would take time before the full toll of the damage is known.</p> <p>The Marshall Fire and a second, smaller blaze further north — the Middle Fork Fire — are believed to have been sparked by downed power lines, according to the Boulder County Sheriff’s Office. Meteorologists recorded 100 mph wind gusts, pushing the flames in the direction of urban areas and increasing the fire’s size to over 1,600 acres.</p> <p>Advertisement</p>

“It’s absolutely devastating to lose the number of homes, businesses that we’ve seen,” National Weather Service meteorologist Jennifer Stark said from her office in Boulder. “It’s historic and devastating to the people who live here.”

Wildfires are becoming a worse and, increasingly, year-round threat in Colorado, [state records show](#). All of the state’s 20 biggest wildfires to date have occurred since 2001 and four of the five largest since 2018.

While there is “potential for fires year-round, depending on the conditions,” Superior Mayor Clint Folsom said most fires in the area take place during the drier and hotter seasons.

This summer brought about a slew of wildfires across the West — spurred by heat waves, drought and dry vegetation on the ground. The conditions have not improved through the colder months, in which the state has been grappling with a record-setting lack of snow. Those dry conditions along with strong winds are believed to have quickly intensified the blaze.

“Unfortunately it’s kind of the perfect storm,” Folsom said.

Stark, with the National Weather Service, said La Niña — a natural cooling of the tropical Pacific Ocean which impacts weather throughout the globe — and an extended period of warmer-than-normal temperatures probably contributed to the drought.

“Any spark is going to race and get out of control very quickly,” she said.

The intense winds were complicating firefighting operations.

“My county is on fire,” Pelle said. “But this is the kind of fire you can’t fight head on.”

In Superior, a town with a population of about 13,000 known as a family-oriented community with open spaces and trails, the extent of the damage was widespread. For many, the day started out like any other before a holiday weekend: stocking up on food and running errands.

Jason Fletcher, a 36-year-old Colorado native who was at a Chuck E. Cheese in the town with his family, said he had never been “this close to a fire.”

“It was a typical morning. Blue skies,” Fletcher said, before he and his family started to smell something. A few minutes later, dark smoke began to drift outside.

Robert Gutierrez, 20, was among the scores of shoppers at the town’s busy Costco earlier Thursday when store employees began urging customers to evacuate.

Gutierrez ran to his car and raced to his home in Longmont, roughly 20 miles north of Superior, but the smoke made it difficult to see. Flames licked the side of the road. He didn’t realize he was driving toward the fire until a trucker traveling the other direction began honking at him.

“I don’t know who he is, but I’m extremely grateful for him,” Gutierrez said. “The second I turned around, you could start seeing the flames coming up. Who knows what would have happened if he didn’t warn me.”

William Shrum, 72, lost power in his mobile home around noon — shortly after the fires began — and said he could feel wind gusts shaking his unit as he sat at his kitchen table. Thirty minutes later, he was contacted by the manager of his community and told to evacuate.

Long concerned about wildfires, Shrum had an emergency bed ready in his car, though he still forgot essentials like a toothbrush and contact lenses. Thursday night, he was sitting alone at the corner of a basketball court at a recreation center where he planned to take shelter.

“We’ve had a lot of fires nearby, but not right on top of us like this,” he said. “I hope home is still here when I come back.”

In the southeastern Boulder County town of Louisville, the 114-bed Avista Adventist Hospital said it had evacuated all of its patients — including those in its emergency departments, neonatal intensive care and intensive care units. The hospital’s staff members were sheltering in place, and patients were moved to two other hospitals.

Amanda Miller and her two children live along Coal Creek Trail in Louisville, next to a stretch of tallgrass prairie. She had noticed how dry the area was and wondered, around noon, whether severe weather was in store. When she saw the thick smoke, she quickly realized the danger.

Miller instructed her 12-year-old son and 8-year-old daughter to grab their shoes and get their cat.

“That’s all we left with,” Miller, a 44-year-old journalist, said Thursday evening from a hotel 10 miles from her family’s home.

Just blocks after driving out of their subdivision, they couldn’t even see the neighborhood anymore. Later, as they headed east over the hills, “you could see patches of orange, burning hot in clumps,” Miller said.

She has no idea if her two-story house is still standing.

The Boulder Office of Emergency Management office urged out of towners to stop calling its call center. “If you live outside of Boulder County you are NOT in any danger at this time,” it said in a tweet, adding that its phone lines were overwhelmed.

Some six miles away from the fires, portions of the city of Broomfield — including the Holiday Inn Express and the Hyatt House — were placed under pre-evacuation orders. The police department later ordered the Interlocken area to evacuate, before lifting all mandatory and pre-evacuation orders just before midnight.

Inmates at the local detention center were evacuated, said Rachel Haslett, a spokeswoman for the local police department. She declined to disclose the number of people moved, citing security concerns, but said that the facility typically houses about 80 inmates on any given day.

The treacherous winds have resulted in road closures and toppled “high profile vehicles,” the Colorado State Patrol said in a tweet. Denver International Airport was placed on a ground delay, putting departing flights behind schedule. Rocky Mountain Metropolitan Airport, which is located in Broomfield, was closed as of late Thursday, an airport official confirmed.

Over 20,000 people had been left in the dark Thursday, according to utility company Xcel Energy, after the fires triggered power outages. Later in the evening, Xcel said that it was ending some controlled outages and that more customers would have power restored overnight.

Some were frantically looking for lost pets. A dog boarding facility in Superior was forced to evacuate dogs without alerting their owners. The dogs were sent to the Boulder Humane Society and to City Bark in Thornton, said Amy Hwang, a 28-year-old who lives near Denver and has been helping owners locate their pets over social media.

Polis, the governor, declared a state of emergency to facilitate access to emergency funds that support responding to the fires. The Federal Emergency Management Agency said that it was supporting firefighting costs linked to the Marshall Fire.

“There is no way to quantify the price of a loss,” Polis said at a news conference, acknowledging the sudden way in which hundreds lost homes, family heirlooms and precious memories.

	<p>Many residents had little time to flee, grabbing whatever they could at a moment's notice. Nancy Gordon, 85, threw a change of clothes and her iPad in a bag after seeing smoke clouds and an eerie silence in her neighborhood around 2:30 p.m. She turned on the television and saw flames engulfing homes in nearby Superior.</p> <p>"We could see the red sky," she said. "It was really scary."</p> <p>She's not sure what happened to her home, but said she was grateful to be safe at a shelter, sitting with blankets and a book. Asked if it was hard to leave her home, she said: "I just closed the door and walked out. C'est la vie."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/30 CDC warns: all travelers avoid cruise ships
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2021/12/30/cdc-cruise-warning-avoid-omicron/
GIST	<p>The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Thursday that all travelers — even those who are vaccinated — should avoid cruises.</p> <p>In a statement, the agency said cruise lines reported 5,013 coronavirus cases on ships operating in U.S. waters between Dec. 15 and 29, a massive increase from the 162 cases reported over the previous two weeks.</p> <p>The CDC escalated the travel health notice for cruising from Level 3 to 4, its highest. Previously, the agency advised that people who were not fully vaccinated or those at increased risk of severe illness should not cruise.</p> <p>"This reflects increases in cases onboard cruise ships since identification of the Omicron variant," the CDC said on its website. The agency last lowered its warning from Level 4 to Level 3 on June 17.</p> <p>The update comes as 91 ships carrying passengers from U.S. waters have reported cases over the past seven days and met the threshold for CDC investigation, according to a tally updated Thursday using data submitted by cruise lines.</p> <p>"The virus that causes COVID-19 spreads easily between people in close quarters on board ships, and the chance of getting COVID-19 on cruise ships is very high, even if you are fully vaccinated and have received a COVID-19 vaccine booster dose," the agency said in its warning.</p> <p>Cruise lines have turned to vaccine requirements to create what the industry promotes as a safe haven at sea. Most operators require everyone 12 and older to be fully vaccinated before they board — although some also mandate vaccines for those as young as 5 — and everyone who takes a cruise must test negative.</p> <p>As omicron has fueled surges worldwide, ships have also added rules requiring everyone to wear a mask indoors unless eating or drinking, a requirement that had previously been limited to crowded areas or unvaccinated passengers. On recent trips, some ports have refused to let ships with sick people on board dock.</p> <p>In a statement, the Cruise Lines International Association called the CDC's update "particularly perplexing considering that cases identified on cruise ships consistently make up a very slim minority of the total population onboard" and that most cases are mild or asymptomatic. The cruise industry administers nearly 10 million tests a week in the United States, the group said.</p> <p>"While we are disappointed and disagree with the decision to single out the cruise industry — an industry that continues to go above and beyond compared to other sectors — CLIA and our ocean-going cruise line members remain committed to working collaboratively with the CDC in the interest of public health and safety," the statement said.</p>

The CDC's conditional sailing order, which lays out the rules for cruises during the pandemic, will [expire](#) on Jan. 15. After that, CDC spokeswoman Caitlin Shockey said in an email, the agency "intends to transition to a voluntary program, in coordination with cruise ship operators and other stakeholders, to assist the cruise ship industry to detect, mitigate, and control the spread of COVID-19 onboard cruise ships."

Despite the CDC's warning Thursday — and [a plea](#) from one U.S. senator this week — cruise lines show no signs of shutting down. In the earliest days of the pandemic, when ports refused ships as passengers became ill and died, the industry halted operations. Ships did not start sailing again in the United States until late June, more than 15 months after the shutdown.

[Coronavirus](#) broke through precautionary measures even in the earliest days of the comeback, though the number of cases was far lower. From late June to late October, cruise lines confirmed 1,359 cases on ships sailing in U.S. waters, [according](#) to the CDC.

The markedly higher number of recent infections have so far resulted in relatively mild cases, according to cruise companies.

"Our case count has spiked, but the level of severity is significantly milder," Calvin Johnson, chief medical officer at Royal Caribbean Group, said in a business update Thursday. "We will remain nimble and in constant contact with health authorities."

The company said the highly transmissible new variant had delivered a blow to business, with a drop in bookings and higher number of short-term cancellations. But the company said bookings for the second half of 2022 showed "strong demand from the critical U.S. market."

"We are constantly learning and adjusting as Omicron appears to be ushering in a new phase in the fight against COVID-19," Royal Caribbean Group CEO Richard Fain said in the update. "We expect these factors to have a negative impact in the short term but are optimistic they will lead us to a more pervasive but less severe health environment."

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HEADLINE	12/31 South Africa omicron wave peak passes
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/31/south-africa-omicron-coronavirus-peak/
GIST	<p>South Africa appears to have passed the peak of its omicron variant-driven fourth coronavirus wave, the country's cabinet announced Thursday, adding that there was only a "marginal increase" in fatalities, which remained low compared to previous spikes.</p> <p>The number of infections fell by roughly 30 percent to just under 90,000 for the week ending Dec. 25, down from some 127,000 in the prior corresponding period, government data show. The number of hospital admissions has also been significantly lower over the past 1½ weeks.</p> <p>The country's medical system has capacity to provide "routine health services," authorities said in a Thursday statement, adding that the government would roll back certain pandemic control measures.</p> <p>The relatively swift passage of the latest South African wave is likely to be keenly watched in many other countries struggling with a spike in omicron-driven infections. But at least one prominent South African infectious-disease expert has cautioned against extrapolating from the country's data, given its relatively young population. South Africa is also in the middle of the Southern Hemisphere summer, a time of the year where respiratory illnesses are relatively uncommon.</p> <p>Nonetheless, the decline in hospital admissions that came "almost in real-time" with the dive in case count suggests omicron patients require less medical intervention than those infected with previous versions of the novel coronavirus, said Catherine Bennett, an epidemiologist at Deakin University in Australia.</p>

Preliminary studies have also indicated that omicron [tends to cause milder disease](#) than the coronavirus wild type and other variants, though experts have warned that its highly transmissible nature still poses a risk to health care systems globally.

Even as South African authorities warned that omicron still poses a threat, they lifted restrictions such as a late-night curfew. Restaurants and bars will be allowed to serve alcohol past 11 p.m., and larger indoor gatherings are permitted, so long as there is social distancing. A mask mandate in public areas is still in place.

The relaxation of pandemic control measures is unlikely to lead to a “dramatic” spike in infections even if the decline in cases slows, said Bennett, the Australian expert.

“The fact that hospitalizations are declining is reinforcing that this is probably coming to its natural decline,” she said. “Those restrictions, if they’re not ... a full lockdown, then it’s a marginal difference.”

In a peer-reviewed paper released Tuesday, South African researchers again underscored “decreased severity of disease” after studying data of 466 covid patients recently hospitalized in Tshwane, a metropolitan area that was badly hit by omicron.

The scientists found that the patients required, on average, four days in hospital, or about half that needed earlier in the pandemic.

“A clearer picture has emerged now that we are well beyond the peak of this wave,” wrote Fareed Abdullah of the South African Medical Research Council, the study’s lead author, on Twitter. “This Omicron wave is over in the City of Tshwane. It was a flash flood more than a wave.”

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HEADLINE	12/31 Business leaders struggle: Covid upheaval
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/31/business/ceos-pandemic-leadership.html
GIST	<p>In normal times, there are few words that C.E.O.s like more than “certainty.” Certainty allows executives to issue sales forecasts with oracle-like conviction. Certainty instills leaders with the confidence they need to invest \$500 million in a new factory, or spend \$20 billion buying a competitor. Certainty gives them the verve they need to preside over virtual town hall meetings with their employees and discuss race relations, furloughs, remote work and more.</p> <p>But at companies large and small, new and old, public and private, 2021 was a year that played havoc with expectations. Through it all, C.E.O.s swapped some of their favorite tropes — timelines, confidence, strategic plans — for something new: saying “I don’t know.” Or even: “I changed my mind.”</p> <p>Take Daily Harvest, the food delivery service. It had a major advertising campaign ready to begin this week. In the works for months, it would highlight the problems with the global food system and invite customers into the woes of modern farming. Then, days before Christmas, Rachel Drori, the chief executive, considered scrapping the campaign.</p> <p>“A week ago it felt right,” she said. With Omicron cases surging, the stock markets tanking and a pall cast over the holiday season, “it’s definitely not the right moment,” she said a few days before Christmas.</p> <p>The Daily Harvest team began a frenzied attempt to create a new set of advertisements that spoke to the nation’s unease while also encouraging potential customers to buy premade mulberry oat bowls and turmeric soup.</p> <p>Then Ms. Drori reconsidered. The original campaign would continue, after all.</p>

The myriad related crises of the second year of the pandemic — including a supply chain gone haywire, a topsy-turvy labor market and constantly evolving public health guidelines — turned executives' projections into estimations and return-to-office dates into fairy tales.

Companies that had prized their in-person collaborations went remote forever, with the share of Americans fully working from home rising [27 percentage points](#) from prepandemic levels, and others remade their business models to try to stay afloat. Those decisions demanded agility: In one [IBM study](#), 60 percent of executives surveyed had changed their approach to management during the crisis.

"I've been in retail for 30 years now, and this absolutely feels like a uniquely disruptive time in modern business history," said Kelly Caruso, the chief executive of Shipt, a same-day delivery service owned by Target and based in Birmingham, Ala. "Nobody has come out of the last two years without feeling the pain of the pandemic. The level of uncertainty in business right now — that takes a toll on all of us."

'Shoot, move and communicate'

Ryan Petersen, the chief executive of Flexport, which arranges international shipping, has spent recent months navigating the supply chain crisis. He toured backlogged ports hoping to understand why shipping containers weren't moving. Then he [hired a boat](#) so he could observe firsthand the megatankers marooned off the coast of Los Angeles.

Now, as a year marked by unceasing disruption comes to a close, Mr. Petersen is confronting a distinctly of-the-moment disruption: On the Tuesday before Christmas, he tested positive for the coronavirus.

"I wasn't sure if I was sick or if I ate too many Cheerios last night," he said, adding that his wife, who tested positive a day earlier, usually looks after his diet. "My wife is really sick, and I just gorged myself."

Mr. Petersen said that his symptoms were mild and that he expected to return to work in a matter of days. But his brush with Covid — nearly two full years into the pandemic — highlights the unrelenting chaos facing companies, their workers and their leaders.

"It's been several years of uncertainty," Mr. Petersen said, adding that because of the Omicron variant, Flexport had delayed its return-to-office plans again. "We try to embrace it."

There was once a time when annual planning was anchored in reality. At the start of the year executives could determine, with some accuracy, what made sense for budgets and hiring, which made bold decisions easier to execute.

"As the leader of an organization, you want to give your employees as much certainty as you can," said Jeff Boss, a former member of the Navy SEALs and the author of "Navigating Chaos: How to Find Certainty in Uncertain Situations." "It's very basic, Leadership 101 stuff."

Mr. Boss, who runs a personal defense training company that teaches special-operations combat tactics to ordinary people, said those wartime principles were just as relevant to executives in the C-suite.

"In the military we had a key saying: 'Shoot, move and communicate,'" he said, preaching the virtues of forceful decision-making, a determination to keep pressing forward and maintain transparency. "That same sort of strategy translates into business."

John Waldmann, C.E.O. of the work force management platform Homebase, learned early in his career the primacy of plans, first in management consulting and then in private equity. As someone who had never built software but decided to found a software company, he practiced making promises and then figuring out how he could keep them.

When Covid hit, that approach collapsed. Homebase temporarily lost 60 percent of its customers, which were mostly small businesses and hourly workers. The company laid off 30 percent of its staff. Mr.

Waldmann sat in meetings with his board of directors presenting wildly varying forecasts of how many clients he could ultimately lose, or when the country's economic recovery might begin.

Other organizations were charting similarly tumultuous territory. At Bombas, the sock company, executives instituted a raise and hiring freeze, and had to be honest that they weren't sure whether at some point they would have to do layoffs. At large tech companies, return-to-office dates have been postponed as many as four times.

"We threw out any plans we had, any budget, any road map," Mr. Waldmann said, and with those went the sense of rigid confidence that had previously been at the core of his leadership. "It made it easy to say, 'Let's not kid ourselves.' We have no idea when this is going to end."

'Positive cases in every office'

There's nothing quite like falling ill to bring home the immediacy of the crisis, and Mr. Petersen, of Flexport, wasn't the only C.E.O. in isolation.

Gary Kelly, the chief executive of Southwest Airlines, [tested positive](#) this month, just days after testifying before Congress that masks "don't add much" to the quality of airplane cabin air.

Verizon's chief executive, Hans Vestberg, [said](#) on a company webcast that he had tested positive for Covid this month, adding that his symptoms were mild and encouraging employees to get vaccinated.

And Rich Handler, chief executive of the investment bank Jefferies, shared this month that he had tested positive for the coronavirus and was isolating, days after the bank sent its employees to work from home and mandated booster shots for all those returning to the office by late January.

"The one thing that keeps growing (besides your beard) when you are in isolated lockdown is a very long list of fun things you want to plan to do once you and the world are healed," Mr. Handler [wrote on Instagram](#). "The trick will have to be that list remains a vital priority once all of the uncertainties pass." With the virus spreading as rapidly as at any point during the pandemic, more C-suite infections are all but inevitable. And for some executives, falling ill themselves has reinforced the unpredictability of the moment.

The staffing challenges emerging as workers fall sick, stacked on an environment of already soaring resignations, has made it hard for business leaders to anticipate what the coming months might bring.

Chuck Robbins, the chief executive of Cisco, was supposed to be in Davos, Switzerland, next month for the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum. But as Omicron cases rose last week, he emailed Klaus Schwab, the head of the forum, and told him that Cisco would not be attending. Two days later, Mr. Schwab postponed the gathering, which was set to draw thousands of politicians and executives to the Alps for a week of canapés, cocktails and speeches.

"We've had ongoing challenging situations since I became C.E.O., from tariffs, to the ongoing political situation in the U.S., to the pandemic, the lockdown, the social justice issues, and now the pandemic that won't seem to end, and the supply chain issues," Mr. Robbins said. "Just when you think you've got it figured out, you get another curveball thrown at you."

'Am I being punked?'

Charity: water — a nonprofit — used to hold its annual plans almost sacred. Advancing its vision of clean drinking water for all meant thinking within the widest time horizons, thought the chief executive, Scott Harrison. But looking back at 2021, he realized that some of the organization's biggest decisions couldn't have been predicted in its start-of-the-year plan.

There was the move to begin a Bitcoin trust, which will hold on to its funds until at least 2025, in the hopes of an exponential leap in value. There was the announcement that the team would end its TriBeCa office lease, giving staff members more flexibility in where they worked and lived.

	<p>With the world and the virus in a state of constant flux, Charity: water has shifted its approach to annual reports.</p> <p>“We’re now moving to six-month goals and even more of a quarterly sprint cycle,” Mr. Harrison said. “It’s so hard to imagine where we’ll be 12 months from now.”</p> <p>And some are finding humor in the tumult, whether in broken-up Zoom calls or meetings interrupted by hungry pets. It may be an interminable mess, but at least everyone is going through it together.</p> <p>Lisa Osborne Ross, U.S. chief executive of the public relations firm Edelman, said she had gotten an outpouring of sympathetic notes from her staff after she led one of the rockiest meetings of her career this month.</p> <p>She tried to display an end-of-year memory video, which somehow ended up visible only to her. The audio cut out. Murphy’s Law prevailed. Everything that could go wrong went wrong — and her employees loved it.</p> <p>“I was like, ‘Am I being punked?’” she recalled. “But people said it was the best town hall ever because it was human and funny.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/31 Omicron strains France social contract
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/31/world/europe/covid-france-omicron-vaccines.html
GIST	<p>PARIS — The deal was simple: Get vaccinated and get your normal life back.</p> <p>In a country with high levels of misgivings about Covid-19 vaccines and citizens quick to challenge authority, the deal was an unexpected success. It turned France into one of Europe’s most vaccinated countries, quashed street protests by government critics, and boosted President Emmanuel Macron’s re-election bid as a semblance of normal life returned. Even die-hard skeptics became believers — for a while, at least.</p> <p>“I told myself, great, everybody’s going to get vaccinated and, in three months, we’ll all be OK, we’ll get our freedom back,” said Marc Olissone, 60, who was visiting Paris from northern France and had initially resisted getting a shot. “I got vaccinated because that’s the only way I could go to the movies or visit friends in Paris.”</p> <p>“I believed,” said Mr. Olissone, a former entertainment industry producer who has worked at a funeral home since the start of the pandemic. “But I don’t believe anymore.”</p> <p>As the Omicron variant tears across France, it is straining the unwritten social contract underlying the government’s fight against the virus and undermining the assumptions that Mr. Macron — and many world leaders — relied on. More than previous variants, it is redefining what it means to be fully vaccinated, creating new urgency about booster shots, and elevating the hurdles to gain access to a normalcy that is proving fleeting and, increasingly to many, illusory.</p> <p>Even if vaccines are not as effective at blocking Omicron infections, scientists believe they help keep the illness mild for most people and early studies suggest they are keeping most people out of the hospital. And although health officials still see vaccines as the path out of the pandemic — especially if more people get shots — their availability has not ended the scourge as quickly as hoped.</p> <p>That seems certain to complicate the ability of leaders worldwide to keep their exhausted citizens obeying Covid rules. In France, the stakes are high for Mr. Macron, who made a bet over the summer on the twin powers of vaccines — which he hailed as a “trump card that changes everything” — and a health pass that allowed people, finally, to eat and socialize indoors with relative safety.</p>

Even now — as France reported 206,243 new cases in the past 24 hours on Thursday, the second consecutive day over 200,000 — the government has not wavered. On Monday, it resisted pressure from doctors and scientists to impose a New Year's Eve curfew or postpone the start of school next week, rejecting the stricter restrictions put in place recently by many of [France's neighbors](#), though the city of Paris announced Wednesday that mask-wearing outdoors would become mandatory again.

The government has also shortened the required delay between a second shot and a booster. In the past month, it has reduced the wait from six months to five, then four, and finally three.

"Next it'll be every two weeks?" said Olivier Toulisse, 44, a resident of eastern France who was strolling on the Champs-Élysées in Paris. "I had a lot of hope in vaccines, honestly. I'd really believed that they were going to pull us out of this."

Franck Chauvin, the president of the government's High Council of Public Health and a member of a scientific panel that advises Mr. Macron on the pandemic, acknowledged the corrosive effect that Omicron has had after a relative period of peace since last summer.

"The appearance of new variants, the debate around vaccinations — and we're seeing it now with Omicron — all of this forces us to redefine this social contract," Mr. Chauvin said in an interview.

Beyond the vaccines, Mr. Chauvin said France would likely need to focus more on "greater civic responsibility," by urging more caution in social interactions. He said this evolution was made evident when many citizens got tested before joining their families for the holidays.

Stewart Chau, an analyst for the polling firm Viavoice, said public support for the government's handling of the pandemic has started to slip. "This social contract will not work if there are no tangible results behind it," he said.

Approval of the government's handling of the crisis began rising last March as vaccination began taking off and peaked in August, at 50 percent, following the introduction of the health pass, but has declined in the past month, according to the Elabe polling firm.

The Omicron challenge has also come at a particularly fraught moment, when the government's push to vaccinate children between the ages of 5 years to 11 years, though voluntary, has raised new worries, and schisms.

Since the early stages of the pandemic, the French, like others elsewhere, have been asked to think and act for the greater good: Wear a mask, not necessarily to protect yourself, but others. Protect the elderly. Get vaccinated to stop the virus from circulating.

Frédéric Worms, a French philosopher who has studied the growing fatigue resulting from the pandemic, said the introduction of vaccinations for children between 5 and 11 has sharpened the debate over the self and the greater good.

"It could push people into a free-for-all," he said. "There is a strong anguish, a psychological dimension, in the fact that we would sacrifice ourselves to save our children."

According to a poll by Elabe, more than two-thirds of parents of eligible children are opposed to vaccinating them while 51 percent of the general population is in favor. The experience in the United States and other countries, where significant numbers of children of this age group have already been vaccinated, shows side effects are rare. But many parents are reluctant to expose their children to the new vaccines because the very young rarely fall ill from the virus.

In a park in the 11th arrondissement of Paris, Sandrine Gianati, 40, watched over her two sons, aged 5 and 7. She, her husband, her relatives — all had been vaccinated, except for her children.

“Me, I did it to protect others, out of solidarity,” she said. “And when I see the unvaccinated still don’t want to get vaccinated, I accept that, it’s their choice. But I don’t want my children to be vaccinated for adults who refuse to be.”

Seventy-seven percent of French have received at least two doses, or 90 percent of people 12 years old and over. But some 4 million adults have yet to get a single shot, and the unvaccinated disproportionately make up those who are hospitalized or dying.

“I don’t want to sacrifice my children in the name of solidarity,” Ms. Gianati said, believing that it is too soon to understand the new vaccines’ long-term effects on the very young. “Me, I tell myself that I’m married, I had my two children, I’ve lived my life, and, if I have problems later on, that was my choice. But I don’t want to impose my choice on my children, who are too young to make their own decisions.”

Omicron appears to be shaking, again, people’s faith in the government’s handling of the pandemic. In the early stages, the government’s floundering response — and especially its misleading and contradictory statements on the wearing of masks — created deep mistrust among many French.

Just a year ago, as France kicked off its vaccination campaign, an Ipsos poll of adults in 15 countries found that trust in a Covid-19 vaccine was lowest in France. Only 40 percent of French said they would get vaccinated, compared to 77 percent in Britain and 69 percent in the United States.

But the government pushed ahead with a campaign whose full strategy would emerge over the following months. Members of the president’s scientific advisory panel, including Mr. Chauvin, provided clues in an April article in The Lancet.

“Crucially,” they wrote, “the new approach should be based on a social contract that is clear and transparent.”

In July, Mr. Macron laid out the terms of the deal in a national address.

“For our protection and for our unity, we must move to vaccinate all French,” he said, “because that is the only path back to a normal life.”

Get vaccinated and get a health pass, was the message. The unvaccinated would gradually be pushed out of public spaces.

The policy triggered protests and stirred worries of a mass movement, like the Yellow Vests, whose demonstrations against the government’s economic policies paralyzed much of France three years ago. But the protests petered out as the government struck a winning balance between carrots and sticks.

Today, less than four months before presidential elections, the government is betting it can maintain that balance in the face of Omicron. It asked the French to get their booster shots more rapidly than planned. It is also moving to tighten the eligibility of the health pass by no longer allowing people to obtain it with negative tests but only with proof of vaccination.

Disclosing the new terms of the deal, Prime Minister Jean Castex made no promises of a return to normal life. Rather, Mr. Castex said, “All of this feels like a never-ending movie.”

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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	01/03 Pro-Iran hackers attack Jerusalem Post
SOURCE	https://www.foxnews.com/world/jerusalem-post-hacked-on-anniversary-of-soleimani-drone-strike

GIST	<p>The Jerusalem Post said Monday that its website and Twitter account were targeted by "pro-Iranian hackers" who posted an ominous image of a model of the Israeli Dimona nuclear facility under a ballistic missile attack.</p> <p>"We are close to you where you do not think about it," the text in the image read. The paper pointed out that the missile seems to be fired from a ring known to be found on Qassem Soleimani's hand after a Jan. 2, 2020, U.S. drone strike at Baghdad International Airport that resulted in his death.</p> <p>The paper acknowledged being the target of hackers.</p> <p>"We are aware of the apparent hacking of our website, alongside a direct threat to Israel," the English-language newspaper wrote. "We are working to resolve the issue & thank readers for your patience and understanding."</p> <p>The paper reported last week that Iran distributed a video that showed what an attack on the nuclear facility might look like. Citing the semi-official Fars News Agency, the paper reported that the video clip showed 16 ballistic missiles and five suicide drones taking part in the attack. The simulated attack was called "a new level of Iranian aggressive threats."</p> <p>Robin Wright, a writer for the New Yorker, wrote a recent long-form article about Iran's ability to effectively use ballistic missiles as a form of retaliation. U.S. Central Command Gen. Kenneth McKenzie told Wright that Tehran's missiles have become a more immediate threat than its nuclear program.</p> <p>He said these missiles can "strike effectively across the breadth and depth of the Middle East."</p> <p>"They could strike with accuracy, and they could strike with volume," he told the magazine.</p> <p>It was revealed in May that Israel shared three cellphone numbers used by Soleimani with U.S. intelligence in the hours before U.S. drones unleashed Hellfire missiles on the Iranian general last year, Yahoo News reported.</p> <p>The revelation sheds new light on the role that Israel played in the killing of Soleimani, who the State Department says was responsible for hundreds of U.S. troop deaths as the head of the Revolutionary Guard's elite Quds Force.</p>
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HEADLINE	10/02 Portugal largest TV channel ransom attack
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/lapsus-ransomware-gang-hits-sic-portugals-largest-tv-channel/
GIST	<p>The Lapsus\$ ransomware gang has hacked and is currently extorting Impresa, the largest media conglomerate in Portugal and the owner of SIC and Expresso, the country's largest TV channel and weekly newspaper, respectively.</p> <p>The attack has taken place over the New Year holiday and has hit the company's online IT server infrastructure. Websites for the Impresa group, Expresso, and all the SIC TV channels are currently offline.</p> <p>National airwave and cable TV broadcasts are operating normally, but the attack has taken down SIC's internet streaming capabilities.</p> <p>The Lapsus\$ group took credit for the attack by defacing all of Impresa's sites with a ransom note (pictured at the top of this article). Besides a ransom request, the message claims that the group has gained access to Impresa's Amazon Web Services account.</p> <p>Impresa staff appeared to have regained control over this account earlier today when all the sites were put into maintenance mode, but the attackers immediately tweeted from Expresso's verified Twitter account to show that they still had access to company resources.</p>

The Impresa attack is one of the largest cybersecurity incidents in Portugal's history. Impresa is, by far, the country's largest media conglomerate.

According to [September 2021 TV ratings](#), SIC and all its secondary channels dominate the TV market, while Expresso has the [largest circulation numbers](#) for weekly periodicals. Nonetheless, Impresa also owns many other media companies and magazines, all of which are currently most likely impacted by the attack as well.

Prior to the Impresa attack, the Lapsus\$ group has also hacked and ransomed [Brazil's Ministry of Health](#), and Claro and Embratel, two South American telecommunication providers.

Members of the Lapsus\$ group have not returned a request for comment sent via email. An Impresa spokesperson refused to comment on the attack.

This is the second ransom attack over the winter holiday that has hit a media conglomerate after the [Ryuk gang hit Tribune Publishing](#), owner of the LA Times, in December 2018.

Despite warnings from [US](#) and [German](#) authorities, cyberattacks did not make too many waves during the recently passed winter holidays.

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HEADLINE	12/29 Autom cryptomining malware attacks
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2021/12/ongoing-autom-cryptomining-malware.html
GIST	<p>An ongoing crypto mining campaign has upgraded its arsenal while evolving its defense evasion tactics that enable the threat actors to conceal the intrusions and fly under the radar, new research published today has revealed.</p> <p>Since first detected in 2019, a total of 84 attacks against its honeypot servers have been recorded to date, four of which transpired in 2021, according to researchers from DevSecOps and cloud security firm Aqua Security, who have been tracking the malware operation for the past three years. That said, 125 attacks have been spotted in the wild in the third quarter of 2021 alone, signaling that the attacks have not slowed down.</p> <p>Initial attacks involved executing a malicious command upon running a vanilla image named "alpine:latest" that resulted in the download of a shell script named "autom.sh."</p> <p>"Adversaries commonly use vanilla images along with malicious commands to perform their attacks, because most organizations trust the official images and allow their use," the researchers said in a report shared with The Hacker News. "Over the years, the malicious command that was added to the official image to carry out the attack has barely changed. The main difference is the server from which the shell script autom.sh was downloaded."</p> <p>The shell script initiates the attack sequence, enabling the adversary to create a new user account under the name "akay" and upgrade its privileges to a root user, using which arbitrary commands are run on the compromised machine with the goal of mining cryptocurrency.</p> <p>Although early phases of the campaign in 2019 featured no special techniques to hide the mining activity, later versions show the extreme measures its developers have taken to keep it invisible to detection and inspection, chief among them being the ability to disable security mechanisms and retrieve an obfuscated mining shell script that was Base64-encoded five times to get around security tools.</p> <p>Malware campaigns carried out to hijack computers to mine cryptocurrencies have been dominated by multiple threat actors such as Kinsing, which has been found scanning the internet for misconfigured</p>

[Docker servers](#) to break into the unprotected hosts and install a previously undocumented coin miner strain.

On top of that, a hacking group named [TeamTNT](#) has been [observed striking](#) unsecured Redis database servers, Alibaba Elastic Computing Service ([ECS](#)) instances, exposed Docker APIs, and vulnerable Kubernetes clusters in order to execute malicious code with root privileges on the targeted hosts as well as deploy cryptocurrency-mining payloads and credential stealers. In addition, [compromised Docker Hub accounts](#) have also been employed to host malicious images that were then used to distribute cryptocurrency miners.

"Miners are a low-risk way for cybercriminals to turn a vulnerability into digital cash, with the greatest risk to their cash flow being competing miners discovering the same vulnerable servers," Sophos senior threat researcher Sean Gallagher [noted](#) in an analysis of a Tor2Mine mining campaign, which involves the use of a PowerShell script to disable malware protection, execute a miner payload, and harvest Windows credentials.

In recent weeks, security flaws in the [Log4j logging library](#) as well as [vulnerabilities](#) newly uncovered in Atlassian Confluence, F5 BIG-IP, VMware vCenter, and Oracle WebLogic Servers have been abused to take over machines to mine cryptocurrencies, a scheme known as cryptojacking. Earlier this month, network-attached storage (NAS) appliance maker QNAP [warned](#) of cryptocurrency mining malware targeting its devices that could occupy around 50% of the total CPU usage.

"The Autom campaign illustrates that attackers are becoming more sophisticated, continually improving their techniques and their ability to avoid detection by security solutions," the researchers said. To protect against these threats, it's recommended to monitor suspicious container activity, perform dynamic image analysis, and routinely scan the environments for misconfiguration issues.

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HEADLINE	01/01 NKorea hackers stole \$1.7B cryptocurrency
SOURCE	https://www.hackread.com/n-korean-hackers-billion-cryptocurrency-exchanges/
GIST	<p>The government-backed hackers from North Korea have stolen around \$1.7 billion worth of cryptocurrency from different exchanges during the past five years, claim reports published by local South Korean media outlets Chosun and Newsis.</p> <p>According to reports (1 and 2) that quoted statements from United States federal prosecutor and data released by the American blockchain analysis firm Chainalysis, North Korea considers cryptocurrency a long-term investment.</p> <p>Therefore instead of cashing out all the stolen crypto, the government likes to store the assets while a part of the funds is spent on the country's military supplies.</p> <p>On the other hand, Myong-Hyun, a senior fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies emphasized that cryptocurrency is the only financial asset heavily sanctioned North Korea currently has. That's because bitcoin's price has increased over 60 times since 2017. Thus, it has excellent investment potential.</p> <p>"For North Korea, cryptocurrency has become the only financial asset that can be acquired while it is under tight economic sanctions, and [recognizes its value] for sanctions evasion-related purposes," said Myong-Hyun.</p> <p>North Korean Crypto Hacks</p> <p>North Korea is known for hiring hackers to perform cyber crimes and launder money from other countries. One of the prime suspects in these hacks is the infamous Lazarus group specializing in carrying out malware and phishing attacks to steal cryptocurrency, especially Bitcoin.</p> <p>Although North Korean hackers were behind some large-scale cyberattacks on crypto exchanges, South Korean authorities believe that three noticeable victim companies of their attacks made major headlines.</p>

	The first is the hacking of South Korean Bithumb in 2017 , where around \$32 million worth of crypto was stolen. Then YouBit was targeted in December 2017, and 4,000 bitcoins were obtained illegally, and in September 2020, nearly \$281 million worth of cryptocurrency was lost after Kucoin suffered a massive data breach.
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HEADLINE	12/31 PulseTV in credit cards compromise
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/pulsetv-discloses-potential-compromise-of-200-000-credit-cards/
GIST	<p>U.S. online store PulseTV has disclosed a large-scale customer credit card compromise. As per the notification letter shared with the Office of the Maine Attorney General, more than 200,000 shoppers have been impacted.</p> <p>The platform found out about a potential breach from VISA on March 8, 2021, who informed them that unauthorized credit card transactions were taking place on the site.</p> <p>After running some security checks and scanning for malware, PulseTV was unable to pinpoint any issues on its e-commerce website.</p> <p>However, the problem persisted as law enforcement contacted them a few months later regarding payment card compromises that appeared to have originated from pulsetv.com.</p> <p>The company responded with a new round of investigations, this time engaging the services of a third-party specialist.</p> <p>On November 18, 2021, the investigators "learned that the website had been identified as a common point of purchase for a number of unauthorized credit card transactions for MasterCard."</p> <p>"Based upon communications with the card brands, it is believed that only customers who purchased products on the website with a credit card between November 1, 2019 and August 31, 2021 may have been affected" - PulseTV</p> <p>The information that may have been compromised includes the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full name • Shipping address • Email address • Payment card number • Payment card expiration date • Payment card security code (CVV) <p>The above information is everything required for card-not-present transactions that are used for shopping online.</p> <p>PulseTV customers that made purchases from the site during the specified breach period are recommended to keep a vigilant eye on their bank statements for unauthorized transactions.</p> <p>The platform also announced that they are migrating to a different payment system, will activate two-factor authentication (2FA) on all their accounts, and will utilize endpoint protection tools for greater network visibility and threat mitigation.</p> <p>PulseTV claims that their investigations did not reveal a breach on their systems. They were the common point for multiple unauthorized transactions, though.</p>

	<p>This makes it unclear if a well-hidden skimmer was planted on the website or the cards were stolen from other merchants and only used on PulseTV for shopping.</p> <p>Sometimes, stolen payment cards are used to buy goods that are delivered to package mules and then sold to obtain cash.</p> <p>We have reached out to the platform for more details on the type of the unauthorized transactions that took place on their e-shop, but we haven't received a response yet.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/30 University loses 77TB research data; error
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/university-loses-77tb-of-research-data-due-to-backup-error/
GIST	<p>The Kyoto University in Japan has lost about 77TB of research data due to an error in the backup system of its Hewlett-Packard supercomputer.</p> <p>The incident occurred between December 14 and 16, 2021, and resulted in 34 million files from 14 research groups being wiped from the system and the backup file.</p> <p>After investigating to determine the impact of the loss, the university concluded that the work of four of the affected groups could no longer be restored.</p> <p>All affected users have been individually notified of the incident via email, but no details were published on the type of work that was lost.</p> <p>At the moment, the backup process has been stopped. To prevent data loss from happening again, the university has scrapped the backup system and plans to apply improvements and re-introduce it in January 2022.</p> <p>The plan is to also keep incremental backups - which cover files that have been changed since the last backup happened - in addition to full backup mirrors.</p> <p>Supercomputing is expensive</p> <p>While the details of the type of data that was lost weren't revealed to the public, supercomputer research costs several hundreds of USD per hour, so this incident must have caused distress to the affected groups.</p> <p>The Kyoto University is considered one of Japan's most important research institutions and enjoys the second-largest scientific research investments from national grants.</p> <p>Its research excellence and importance is particularly distinctive in the area of chemistry, where it ranks fourth in the world, while it also contributes to biology, pharmacology, immunology, material science, and physics.</p> <p>We have requested Kyoto University to share more details on the incident and its impact on research groups, but we haven't heard back yet.</p> <p>Japan leading the field</p> <p>Japan happens to have the most powerful supercomputer in the world at the moment, called "Fugaku", operated by the Riken Center for Computational Science, in Kobe.</p> <p>Fugaku is an exascale system made by Fujitsu, capable of computational performance of 442 PFLOPS. The second in the global list, IBM's "Summit", can reach a much smaller figure of 148 PFLOPS.</p> <p>Fugaku cost \$1.2 billion to build and has so far been used for research on COVID-19, diagnostics, therapeutics, and virus spread simulations.</p>

HEADLINE	12/30 Cybercrime fight: takedowns temporary
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/threat-intelligence/takedowns-prove-temporary-tactic-in-cybercrime-fight
GIST	<p>In November, 10 months after an international task force shut down Emotet's servers and infrastructure, the botnet came back online.</p> <p>The new Emotet, which spread malware in a spurt of Spanish-language messages in the latter half of the month, consisted of two botnets using different encryption for communication and additional commands than the previous version, which was taken down in January. At the time of the takedown, the threat had accounted for 7% of attacks on organizations worldwide and often delivered malware or ransomware to the 1.6 million machines compromised by attackers.</p> <p>Emotet's revival highlights how many botnet takedowns lack permanence. Along with the resuscitation of TrickBot in 2020, the resurgence of Emotet demonstrates that the industry and government agencies should take a hard look at whether the tactic needs to be revisited or revised, says David Monnier, a fellow with threat intelligence firm Team Cymru.</p> <p>"It is an incredibly valid question that we should be asking, as we do with anything: If you are not getting the results you want, should [you] be doing something different instead?" he says. "Are we getting better or is this [the movie] 'Groundhog Day'?"</p> <p>Temporary Disruptions</p> <p>More than a decade ago, Microsoft pioneered using legal measures to allow private companies to take down botnets. More than a score of takedowns later, multi-organizational efforts — which now often include law enforcement and private-industry partners — often only temporarily disrupt botnet infrastructures. Trickbot's operators, for example, started reviving the network within a few weeks of the initial takedown.</p> <p>In Emotet's case, the takedown led to a 10-month hiatus, during which the botnet's operators appear to have made changes, such as moving away from the increasing use of cybercriminal services for parts of the infection and payload chain, says Scott Scheferman, a principal cyber strategist at Eclipsium, a firmware- and hardware-security firm.</p> <p>"These actors have a lot of resilience and a ton of money. As a result, they can adapt easily," he says. "They are going back to the triad of distribution, a Trickbot loader, and ransomware drop. They are pulling back into themselves centrally, rather than using everything as a service."</p> <p>The fundamental problem for defenders is that while infrastructure can be disrupted, the people behind the attacks — often protected by complicit nations with liberal cybercrime laws — are unfettered and remain able to work to rebuild their malicious distribution networks. While the United States' and other nations' focus on more aggressive measures to curtail cybercrime, in general, and ransomware, in particular, will help, cybercrime is too profitable for many groups to pare back their operations.</p> <p>"A lot of these sophisticated actors that have become prolific — the Emotet groups and REvil groups — they are really operating out of places where the West can't touch them," says Michael DeBolt, chief intelligence officer of threat-intelligence firm Intel 471, adding that such downsides do not make the activity not worthwhile. "From a higher level, though, obviously disruption efforts against sophisticated groups should be the target of not just law enforcement, but also of private-industry groups."</p> <p>In addition to taking down the infrastructure of specific actors, focusing on identifying and disrupting critical criminal infrastructure — such as bulletproof hosting — could also result in more long-term benefits, he adds. In 2011, for example, researchers discovered 95% of the sales revenues of spam-advertised products were handled by about a dozen banks, which allowed financial authorities to disrupt a wide swath of criminal groups.</p>

Defenders and government officials need to identify similar keystones in the current cybercrime landscape.

"What this comes down to is really identifying pain points that can increase the time, money, and effort that the cybercriminals need to do business," DeBolt says. "If we identify a server or back-end infrastructure and we take that down, we see, great, it does not completely cut the head off the snake, but it causes them to back off a little bit and rejig, and that is time, money, and effort for them."

Consistent Effort

Some takedown efforts have led to success. The takedown of the Necurs botnet — which acted as a distribution platform for other malware, such as GameOver Zeus and Trickbot — appears to have largely worked. The botnet, which had gone silent and previously returned, largely disappeared in March 2020 following [a takedown spearheaded by Microsoft and Bitsight](#).

Still, many attackers learn from such actions and return, improving their tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs). Fortunately, defenders and law enforcement are also getting more efficient in takedown efforts, says Team Cymru's Monnier. While the balance currently seems to favor attackers, if disruption efforts take less time for defenders to accomplish and more time and effort for attackers to recover from, taking down servers and infrastructure — while temporary — will be worth it, he says.

There isn't necessarily a silver bullet or a single event that can disrupt these efforts, but consistent effort will keep up the pressure on groups and make cybercrime less profitable, the former US Marine says.

"We have a saying in the Marine Corps: You have a choice between the pain of discipline or the pain of regret," Monnier says. "We have to take the same approach, the same tenacity. As long as we make it harder for them, we have to do so."

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HEADLINE	12/29 Ransom gang hit police; provides decryptor
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/ransomware-gang-coughs-up-decryptor-after-realizing-they-hit-the-police/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>The AvosLocker ransomware operation provided a free decryptor after learning they encrypted a US government agency.</p> <p>Last month, a US police department was breached by AvosLocker, who encrypted devices and stole data during the attack.</p> <p>However, according to a screenshot shared by security researcher pancak3, after learning that the victim was a government agency, they provided a decryptor for free.</p> <p>While they provided a decryptor to the police department, the ransomware operation refused to provide a list of stolen files or how they breached the department's network.</p> <p>A member of the AvosLocker operation told BleepingComputer today that they have no policy on who they target but usually avoid encrypting government entities and hospitals.</p> <p>"You should note, however, that sometimes an affiliate will lock a network without having us review it first," the AvosLocker operator told BleepingComputer.</p> <p>When asked if they purposely avoid targeting government agencies out of fear of law enforcement, they said it's more because "tax payer money's generally hard to get."</p> <p>However, international law enforcement operations have resulted in numerous indictments or arrests of ransomware members and money launderers over the past year. These arrests include members of the REvil, Egregor, Netwalker, and Clop ransomware gangs.</p>

	<p>This increased pressure is shown to have a good effect, leading to numerous ransomware operations shutting down, including the DarkSide, BlackMatter, Avaddon, and REvil operations.</p> <p>Unfortunately, many of these ransomware gangs just rebrand as a new operation, thinking it will help them evade law enforcement.</p> <p>Even with these arrests and increased pressure, AvosLocker said they are not worried about law enforcement as they "have no jurisdiction" in the "motherland."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/29 Chinese hackers leverage Log4j exploit
SOURCE	https://www.cyberscoop.com/chinese-hackers-use-log4j-exploit-to-go-after-academic-institution/
GIST	<p>A Chinese hacking group known for industrial espionage and intelligence collection used a vulnerability in Log4j to go after a large academic institution, researchers at CrowdStrike revealed Wednesday.</p> <p>Threat analysts observed the group attempting to install malware after gaining access using a modified version of a Log4j exploit for VMWare Horizon, a virtual workspace technology. CrowdStrike also observed the Chinese hackers trying to harvest credentials for further exploitation.</p> <p>CrowdStrike analysts believe that the group behind the attack, which it is calling “Aquatic Panda,” has likely been active since at least May 2020. Its operations have primarily focused on targets in the telecommunications, technology and government sectors.</p> <p>“Because OverWatch disrupted the attack before AQUATIC PANDA could take action on their objectives, their exact intent is unknown,” Param Singh, vice president of CrowdStrike OverWatch, wrote to CyberScoop in an email. “This adversary, however, is known to use tools to maintain persistence in environments so they can gain access to intellectual property and other industrial trade secrets.”</p> <p>CrowdStrike didn’t name the institution that Aquatic Panda targeted, or its location.</p> <p>Researchers at Mandiant and Microsoft have also reported activity by Chinese threat groups exploiting the Log4j vulnerability. Microsoft observed attacks by the Chinese group, “HAFNIUM,” using the vulnerability against virtualization infrastructure. Microsoft also warned of attacks using the vulnerability by groups tied to Iran, North Korea and Turkey.</p> <p>Log4j is an open-source software tool ubiquitous across the tech industry and can be found in millions of systems, making the full scope of potential victims hard to track. Cybercriminals raced to take advantage of the vulnerability when it was revealed earlier this month, meaning that even if organizations have patched their systems attackers could have already established a foothold.</p> <p>The Department of Homeland Security’s Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency on Dec. 22 issued an advisory on how to deal with potential risks to IT and cloud services that the vulnerability poses.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/29 Number of malicious dormant domains rise
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/silent-danger-one-in-five-aged-domains-is-malicious-risky-or-unsafe/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>The number of malicious dormant domains is on the rise, and as researchers warn, roughly 22.3% of strategically aged domains pose some form of danger.</p> <p>This was a realization that struck analysts when it was revealed that the SolarWinds threat actors relied on domains registered years before their malicious activities began.</p>

Based on that, efforts in detecting strategically aged domains before they get the chance to launch attacks and support malicious activities have picked up pace.

A report from Palo Alto Networks' Unit42 reveals their researchers' findings after looking at tens of thousands of domains each day throughout September 2021.

They concluded that approximately 3.8% are straight-out malicious, 19% are suspicious, and 2% are unsafe for work environments.

Why let a domain age

The goal behind registering a domain long before the threat actors will use it is to create a "clean record" that will prevent security detection systems from undermining the success of malicious campaigns.

Typically, newly registered domains (NRDs) are [more likely to be malicious](#), so security solutions treat them as suspicious and have more chances to flag them.

However, Unit42 explains in its report that strategically aged domains are three times more likely to be malicious than NRDs.

In some cases, these domains stayed dormant for two years before their DNS traffic suddenly increased by 165 times, indicating the launch of an attack.

Signs of “snake eggs”

An obvious sign of a malicious domain is the sudden spike in its traffic. Legitimate services that registered their domains and launched services months or years later exhibit gradual traffic growth.

The domains that weren't destined for legitimate use generally have incomplete, cloned, or generally questionable content. As expected, WHOIS registrant details are missing too.

Another clear sign of a purposefully aged domain that is meant to be used in malicious campaigns is DGA subdomain generation.

DGA (domain generation algorithm) is [an established method](#) of generating unique domain names and IP addresses to serve as new C2 communication points. The goal is to [evade detection](#) and blocklists.

By looking at the DGA element alone, Palo Alto's detectors identified two suspicious domains each day, spawning hundreds of thousands of subdomains on the day of its activation.

Real examples

One notable case captured by Unit42 in September was a Pegasus spying campaign that used two C2 domains registered in 2019 and awoke in July 2021.

DGA domains played a vital role in that campaign, carrying 23.22% of the traffic on the activation day, which spiked 56 times higher than normal DNS traffic volumes. A few days later, DGA traffic reached 42.04% of the total.

Other real-world examples detected by the researchers include phishing campaigns that used DGA subdomains as cloaking layers that will direct ineligible visitors and crawlers to legitimate sites while pushing victims to the phishing pages.

This shows that these DGAs serve not only as C2 domains but also as proxy layers that can be explicitly configured to the campaign's needs.

Finally, there were also cases of wildcard DNS abuse, with multiple subdomains all pointing to the same IP address.

	<p>“These hostnames serve randomly generated websites that fill out some website templates with random strings,” details the Unit42 report.</p> <p>“They could be used for black hat SEO. Specifically, these web pages link to each other to obtain a high rank from search engine crawlers without providing valuable information.”</p> <p>In most cases, strategically aged domains are used by sophisticated actors who operate in a more organized context and have long-term plans.</p> <p>They're used for leveraging DGA to exfiltrate data through DNS traffic, serve as proxy layers, or mimic the domains of well-known brands (cybersquatting).</p> <p>Although detecting DGA activity is still challenging, defenders can achieve a lot by monitoring DNS data like queries, responses, and IP addresses and focusing on identifying patterns.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/29 K-12 Cybersecurity Act signed into law
SOURCE	https://securityintelligence.com/news/what-is-k-12-cybersecurity-act/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>Present Joe Biden signed the K-12 Cybersecurity Act into law, which lays out four objectives with the goal of strengthening the cybersecurity of the United States’ K-12 educational institutions. What do these mean for schools?</p> <p>What Is the K-12 Cybersecurity Act?? Introduced by U.S. Representative James R. Langevin (D-RI) as H.R.4691 in July, the K-12 Cybersecurity Act consists of four objectives.</p> <p>The first aim is for the director of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) to conduct a study on the cybersecurity risks confronting grades K-12 schools within 120 days of the act taking effect. As part of that study, CISA’s director will explore the challenges the education sector faces. These include securing information systems and protecting sensitive student and employee records, as well as putting cybersecurity protocols in place.</p> <p>After completing the study and presenting their findings to Congress, the director will pursue the act’s second objective. CISA will publish guidelines that K-12 schools can follow to mitigate the digital risks confronting them.</p> <p>Next, the director of CISA will use the survey’s findings and guidelines to develop an online training toolkit. The purpose of the resource will be to educate officials about best practices. In addition, it will provide officials with strategies that they can use to implement those guidelines.</p> <p>The final objective of the K-12 Cybersecurity Act is for the director to make the findings of the study, the recommendations and the online training toolkit available to the public. They’ll be posted on the website of the Department of Homeland Security.</p> <p>How to Improve School Cybersecurity Today As of this writing, CISA’s director still has several months to do this work. Some of those threats are already well-known, however. For instance, schools suffer from malware incidents and ransomware attacks. The logic here is that threat actors can steal K-12 schools’ data. With it, they can conduct follow-up attacks or monetize on the darknet.</p> <p>Another issue with K-12 cybersecurity is that schools tend to lack cyber awareness and training. This makes it difficult for teachers and administrators to follow best practices (let alone know about them). This is even more true in an age of remote learning.</p>

	<p>Therefore, K-12 schools can defend themselves against some of the threats discussed above by creating a security awareness training program. This program should use education modules to make people more familiar with the threats confronting them.</p> <p>K-12 schools can complement those human controls with technical security measures. For example, use log monitoring and management to gain visibility over potential threats. In addition, use data backups to strengthen schools' defenses against data destruction events such as ransomware. While the K-12 Cybersecurity Act has yet to show findings, these steps will help prepare and protect kids' information in the meantime.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/30 Rhode Island AG opens RIPTA probe
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/rhode-island-attorney-general-opening-investigation-into-transit-authority-after-data-breach/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Rhode Island Attorney General Peter Neronha told The Providence Journal on Thursday that he is going to open an investigation into a data breach involving the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA). This comes after outrage grew this week over the agency's handling of the incident.</p> <p>Neronha's office told the news outlet that they are receiving a high number of calls about the incident, prompting them to look into what happened.</p> <p>On December 21, RIPTA sent out a notice saying that August 5 was when it first identified a "security incident." RIPTA eventually discovered that data was exfiltrated from their systems between August 3 and August 5. The files contained information about RIPTA health plans and included Social Security numbers, addresses, dates of birth, Medicare identification numbers and qualification information, health plan member identification numbers, and claims information.</p> <p>The US Department of Health and Human Services breach website indicates that 5,015 people were affected.</p> <p>Earlier this week, the ACLU of Rhode Island asked RIPTA to explain why the personal information of people with no connection to the agency was included in the data breach.</p> <p>Local ACLU chapter executive director Steven Brown says his chapter has received complaints from people who got letters from RIPTA notifying them that their personal data, including personal health care information, was accessed in a security breach of RIPTA's computer systems.</p> <p>"According to the letter, the breach was identified on August 5th, but it was purportedly not until October 28th -- over two and a half months later -- that RIPTA identified the individuals whose private information had been hacked, and it then took almost two more months to notify those individuals," Brown wrote.</p> <p>The letters reveal that the number of victims listed on the US Department of Health and Human Services website (5,015) does not match the number in the breach notices sent to victims: 17,378 people.</p> <p>"Worst -- and most inexplicable -- of all, the people who have contacted us are even more deeply distressed by the fact that RIPTA somehow had any of their personal information -- much less their personal health care information -- in the first place, as they have no connection at all with your agency," Brown added.</p> <p>The ACLU also said that RIPTA was not being transparent about the breach, noting that RIPTA's public statements about the incident are very different than the letters being sent to victims. RIPTA's initial statement implied that those affected were only the beneficiaries of RIPTA health plans.</p>

"Based on the complaints we have received, this is extremely misleading and seriously downplays the extensive nature of the breach. Most importantly, it ignores, and fails to address, a host of questions regarding how the information that was hacked was in RIPTA's hands in the first place," Brown wrote.

RIPTA senior executive Courtney Marciano told ZDNet that the state's previous health insurance provider sent the files that included the sensitive information of those not working for RIPTA.

Marciano added that RIPTA only mailed out notification letters to individuals whose personal information was contained in the files (which are from a provider who administered a plan that is no longer active) and accessed by the hackers.

[The Providence Journal](#) noted that RIPTA previously used UnitedHealthcare but now uses Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Rhode Island.

"Upon discovering this incident, RIPTA worked diligently to verify all individuals (both internal RIPTA employees, as well as individuals outside of the agency) whose personal information was in the files that were accessed or infiltrated by an unauthorized party. After the analysis was complete, RIPTA searched its records and identified address information for those individuals," Marciano said.

"This process was time and labor-intensive, but RIPTA wanted to be certain what information was involved and to whom it pertained. No passenger information was compromised."

The situation caused even more outrage when Rep. Edith Ajello told The Providence Journal that her information was involved in the breach despite her never having been on a RIPTA bus in "almost a decade."

Ajello explained that when she pressed RIPTA to explain why her information was involved, she was told that UnitedHealthcare sent RIPTA "all state employees' health claims." This allegedly forced the agency to effectively sort through the entire batch to figure out which claims were from RIPTA employees.

The Attorney General will now investigate whether RIPTA violated Rhode Island's [Identity Theft Protection Act of 2015](#), which gives government agencies 45 days to report a breach. It took RIPTA more than two months to notify victims.

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HEADLINE	12/30 'Have I Been pwned' adds RedLine logs
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/have-i-been-pwned-adds-441k-accounts-stolen-by-redline-malware/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>The Have I Been Pwned data breach notification service now lets you check if your email and password are one of 441,000 accounts stolen in an information-stealing campaign using RedLine malware.</p> <p>RedLine is currently the most widely used information-stealing malware, distributed through phishing campaigns with malicious attachments, YouTube scams, and warez/crack sites.</p> <p>Once installed, the RedLine malware will attempt to steal cookies, credentials, credit cards, and autocomplete information stored in browsers. It also steals credentials stored in VPN clients and FTP clients, steals cryptocurrency wallets, and can download additional software or execute commands on the infected system.</p> <p>The stolen data is collected into an archive, called "logs," and uploaded to a remote server from where the attacker can later collect them.</p> <p>Attackers use these logs to compromise other accounts or sell them on dark web criminal marketplaces for as little as \$5 per log.</p>

RedLine logs publicly exposed

Last weekend, security researcher [Bob Diachenko](#) found a server exposing over 6 million RedLine logs collected in August and September 2021. The threat actor likely used this server to store stolen data but failed to secure it properly.

Diachenko told BleepingComputer that while this data contains 6 million records, many had the same email address used for different services.

This week many LastPass received emails warning that their [master passwords may be compromised](#) as they were used to log in from an unusual location.

Diachenko found that numerous LastPass credentials were stolen and stored in the exposed RedLine logs and checked various emails for LastPass users who received the emails to see if they were listed.

Diachenko told us that the server is still accessible but no longer appears to be used by the threat actors as the number of logs has not increased.

To make it easier for others to check if a hacker stole their data in the exposed RedLine malware campaign, Diachenko shared the data with Troy Hunt, who added it to his Have I Been Pwned service.

The RedLine data contains 441,657 unique email addresses stolen by RedLine that can now be searched on [Have I Been Pwned](#).

Unfortunately, if your email address is listed in the RedLine malware logs, it's not enough to just change the passwords associated with that email account.

As RedLine targets all of your data, you must change your password for all accounts used on the machine, including corporate VPN and email accounts, and other personal accounts.

Furthermore, as RedLine attempts to steal cryptocurrency wallets, you should immediately transfer the tokens to another wallet if you own any.

Finally, if your email is listed as part of the RedLine records, you should scan your computer using an antivirus software to detect and remove any installed malware.

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HEADLINE	01/02 NASA director Twitter account hacked
SOURCE	https://securityaffairs.co/wordpress/126243/hacking/nasa-director-hacked-by-powerful-greek-army.html?web_view=true
GIST	<p>The Twitter account of the NASA Director and Sr Technologist for Air Transportation System Mr. Parimal Kopardekar (@nasapk) was hacked by the Powerful Greek Army group.</p> <p>I contacted the group for a comment, a spokesman told me that they have targeted the NASA Director for fun, the attack was not politically motivated. They have chosen Kopardekar because they were looking for someone who works at NASA.</p> <p>I asked them how did they hack the account and they claim to have an exploit that allows them to take over Twitter accounts, but I was not able to verify it.</p> <p>The group told me that they are hacking for fun to demonstrate that “that nobody is safe online.”</p> <p>In April 2020, the Powerful Greek Army group compromised the Twitter account of the vice-speakers of the Greek Parliament and KINAL MP, Odysseas Konstantinopoulos.</p>

“Government we have warned you. Do not lie to your own people again” states one of the messages published by the compromised account, while in another message he posted, he said:” To clarify something. We do NOT have an issue with this one, with the one with whom we have a big issue is the government and its moves. Friendship”.

The list of victims of the group is long and includes Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Finance, Bank of Nigeria, The National Bank of North Macedonia, and Ministry of Defence Of Azerbaijan.

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HEADLINE	01/01 Fears: cyber chaos could spark wars
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/1/fears-grow-cyber-chaos-will-spark-wars-hack-attack/
GIST	<p>The nightmare of America under cyberattack is happening now and it is not going to stop anytime soon. Foreign adversaries and criminal gangsters alike are hammering all aspects of society from hospitals to schools to government offices.</p> <p>In December alone, a ransomware attack on human resources software disrupted operations for some hospitals operated by Ascension Healthcare, the timekeeping system of New York City’s Metropolitan Transit Authority, and the government of Prince George’s County in Maryland, among others.</p> <p>That ransomware attack was far from December’s worst events, however, as private cybersecurity companies said they saw hackers backed by China, Iran and other countries exploiting a widely used piece of software, the open-source logging platform Apache Log4j.</p> <p>People have warned of a cyber Pearl Harbor and 9/11 style cyberattack for decades, but the U.S. has thus far avoided suffering a major surprise cyberattack that costs lives and spreads to other realms of society. But considering what happens if a cyberattack causes a war to break out is something professionals in business and government have prepared for.</p> <p>“I hate to say it, I do think about it, it’s a pretty scary thing, [and] I hope that we never experience a cyberattack that’s considered a declaration of war,” said Charles Carmakal, senior vice president at cybersecurity firm Mandiant. “And I don’t know that we have in the United States, I don’t know that I’ve seen anything that I would say should have been declared as an act of war, but there have been some situations in general, in other parts of the world that have been declared acts of war.”</p> <p>Mr. Carmakal pointed to a 2017 cyberattack, NotPetya, by Russia against Ukraine as the sort of thing that would be considered an act of war in the U.S. The NotPetya attack leveraged accounting software to infect computers in Ukraine and wreck networks that ultimately did \$10 billion of damage globally, according to the Brookings Institution.</p> <p>The rules for war in cyberspace are less clearly established than in other domains.</p> <p>National Cyber Director John C. Inglis told the House Oversight and Reform Committee in November that a cyberattack is typically considered an act of war when it achieves the same amount of damage as a kinetic weapon, including things like the “loss of health safety, national security of a significant nature.”</p> <p>Some cyberattacks have come dangerously close to Mr. Inglis’ generic definition of cyber warfare.</p> <p>The Biden administration said in November it had evidence of Iran-backed hackers exploiting vulnerabilities at hospitals. The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Agency alert on the hacks, however, said CISA, the FBI and their partners in the U.K. and Australia determined the hackers were focused on exploiting known vulnerabilities over picking specific targets in the healthcare and transportation industries.</p> <p>The Biden administration also has accused Iranians of attempting to interfere in the 2020 elections, particularly aimed at Republican lawmakers, Democratic voters and news outlets. Last month, the Justice</p>

Department charged two Iranians with computer fraud and voter intimidation while the Treasury Department imposed sanctions on six Iranian people and one Iranian entity.

Such cyber operations are nothing new for the Iranians, but wading into politics, particularly efforts to influence voters through intimidation beforehand and sowing distrust afterward, is a new tactic for Iran, said Jonathan Couch, senior vice president at risk intelligence company ThreatQuotient.

“I think they’ve learned from the Russians. It’s one of those things where, despite a lot of the rhetoric that goes on, actually hacking elections at scale is an incredibly difficult thing to do just because of how we run our elections and how those things go about,” said Mr. Couch, who formerly served in the Air Force. “One of the things the Russians successfully exploited back in 2016 and now the Iranians are getting involved with it, it’s more what I’ll call ‘influence operations’ to where if I can’t go in and change the votes themselves, let me try to influence the voters to change their vote.”

America has narrowly missed suffering major catastrophes caused by cyber problems in the last year. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas recently told USA Today’s editorial board that a February hack on a water treatment plant in Oldsmar, Florida, “should have gripped our entire country.”

A hacker who sought to change the drinking water’s level of sodium hydroxide, the liquid drain ingredient lye, was prevented from doing so by a plant operator in the town near Tampa.

According to Mr. Mayorkas, the hacker did not have a financial motivation and just wanted to do harm.

The crush of cyberattacks on America has made predictions for the future look grim and caused lawmakers to consider an unusual solution resembling vigilante justice — empowering private companies to legally hack back against attackers.

Sens. Sheldon Whitehouse, Rhode Island Democrat, and Steve Daines, Montana Republican, proposed a hack-back bill directing the Department of Homeland Security to study the benefits and risks of allowing private groups the authority to take offensive action.

“The status quo has failed to protect the American people from cyberattacks. That’s why I’m challenging federal officials to think outside the box and put all options on the table,” Mr. Daines said in a statement to The Washington Times.

Giving private groups the authority to legally fight back is a proposal that may find fans in the private sector and among victims. Mr. Carmakal said he was not familiar with the senators’ proposal but he believed there was an opportunity for the government to entrust a few commercial entities with the ability to take aggressive action against attackers.

He stressed that not anyone should have the legal ability to strike back because not everyone has the knowledge necessary to do so and it could cause a conflict to escalate.

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HEADLINE	12/31 China police track critics on social media
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/31/business/china-internet-police-twitter.html
GIST	<p>When Jennifer Chen traveled back to her hometown in central China last winter for Lunar New Year, she thought little about Twitter. She had around 100 followers on an account she believed to be anonymous.</p> <p>While living in China, she retweeted news and videos, and occasionally made comments censored on Chinese platforms, like voicing her support for Hong Kong's protesters and her solidarity with minorities who have been interned.</p> <p>It wasn't much, but it was enough for the authorities to go after her. The police knocked on her parents' door when she was visiting. She said they had summoned her to the station, questioned her and then commanded her to delete her Twitter posts and account. They continued to track her when she went</p>

overseas to study, calling her and her mother to ask if Ms. Chen had recently visited any human rights websites.

The Chinese government, which has built an extensive digital infrastructure and security apparatus to control dissent on its own platforms, is going to even greater lengths to extend its internet dragnet to unmask and silence those who criticize the country on Twitter, Facebook and other international social media.

These new investigations, targeting sites blocked inside China, are relying on sophisticated technological methods to expand the reach of Chinese authorities and the list of targets, according to a New York Times examination of government procurement documents and legal records, as well as interviews with one government contractor and six people pressured by the police.

To hunt people, security forces use advanced investigation software, public records and databases to find all their personal information and international social media presence. The operations sometimes target those living beyond China's borders. Police officers are pursuing dissidents and minor critics like Ms. Chen, as well as Chinese people living overseas and even citizens of other nations.

The digital manhunt represents the punitive side of the government's [vast campaign](#) to counter negative portrayals of China. In recent years, the Communist Party [has raised bot armies](#), [deployed diplomats](#) and [marshaled influencers](#) to push its narratives and drown out criticism. The police have taken it a step further, hounding and silencing those who dare to talk back.

With growing frequency, the authorities are harassing critics both inside and outside China, as well as threatening relatives, in an effort to get them to delete content deemed criminal. One video recording, provided by a Chinese student living in Australia, showed how the police in her hometown had summoned her father, called her with his phone and pushed her to remove her Twitter account.

The new tactics raise questions about the spread of powerful investigative software and bustling data markets that can make it easy to track even the most cautious social media user on international platforms. U.S. regulators have [repeatedly blocked Chinese deals](#) to acquire American technology companies over the access they provide to personal data. They have done much less to control the widespread availability of online services that offer location data, social media records and personal information.

For Chinese security forces, the effort is a daring expansion of a remit that [previously focused on Chinese platforms](#) and the [best-known overseas dissidents](#). Now, violations as simple as a post of a critical article on Twitter — or in the case of 23-year-old Ms. Chen, quoting, “I stand with Hong Kong” — can bring swift repercussions.

Actions against people for speaking out on Twitter and Facebook have increased in China since 2019, according to [an online database](#) aggregating them. The database, compiled by [an anonymous activist](#), records cases based on publicly available verdicts, police notices and news reports, although information is limited in China.

“The net has definitely been cast wider overseas during the past year or so,” said Yaxue Cao, editor of ChinaChange.org, a website that covers civil society and human rights. The goal is to encourage already widespread self-censorship among Chinese people on global social media, she said, likening the purging of critics to an overactive lawn mower.

“They cut down the things that look spindly and tall — the most outspoken,” she said. “Then they look around, the taller pieces of grass no longer cover the lower ones. They say, ‘Oh these are problematic too, let’s mow them down again.’”

Chinese security authorities are bringing new technical expertise and funding to the process, according to publicly available procurement documents, police manuals and the government contractor, who is working on overseas internet investigations.

In 2020, when the police in the western province of Gansu sought companies to help monitor international social media, they laid out a grading system. One criterion included a company's ability to analyze Twitter accounts, including tweets and lists of followers. The police in Shanghai [offered \\$1,500](#) to a technology firm for each investigation into an overseas account, according to a May procurement document.

Such work often begins with a single tweet or Facebook post that has attracted official attention, according to the contractor, who declined to be named because he was not approved to speak publicly about the work. A specialist in tracking people living in the United States, he said he used voter registries, driver's license records and hacked databases on the dark web to pinpoint the people behind the posts. Personal photos posted online can be used to infer addresses and friends.

A Chinese police [manual](#) and [examination](#) for online security professionals detailed and ranked the types of speech crimes that investigators seek out, labeling them with a one, two or three depending on the severity of the violation.

One denotes criticism of top leadership or plans to politically organize or protest; two includes the promotion of liberal ideology and attacks on the government; and three, the least urgent, refers to content ranging from libel to pornography. The manual specifically called for monitoring activity on foreign websites.

The contractor said he used the rankings to classify infractions on dossiers he submitted to his bosses in China's security apparatus. In a sample document reviewed by The Times, he listed key details about each person he looked into, including personal and career information and professional and family connections to China, as well as a statistical analysis of the reach of the person's account. His approach was corroborated by procurement documents and guides for online security workers.

Over the past year, he said, he had been assigned to investigate a mix of Chinese undergraduates studying in the United States, a Chinese American policy analyst who is a U.S. citizen and journalists who previously worked in China.

Those caught up in the dragnet are often baffled at how the authorities linked them to anonymous social media accounts on international platforms.

The Chinese student in Australia, who provided the video recording from her police questioning, recalled the terror she had felt when she first received a call from her father in China in spring 2020. The police told him to go to a local station over a parody account she had created to mock China's leader, Xi Jinping. She declined to be named over concerns about reprisals.

In an audio recording she also provided, the police told her via her father's phone that they knew her account was being used from Australia. Her distraught father instructed her to listen to the police.

Three weeks later, they summoned him again. This time, calling her via video chat, they told her to report to the station when she returned to China and asked how much longer her Australian visa was valid. Fearful, she denied owning the Twitter account but filmed the call and kept the account up. A few months later, Twitter suspended it.

After an inquiry from The Times, Twitter restored the account without explaining why it had taken it down.

Consequences can be steep. When a Chinese student living in Taiwan criticized China this year, he said, both of his parents disappeared for 10 days. His social media accounts within China were also immediately shut down.

	<p>The student, who declined to be named out of fear of further reprisals, said he still did not know what had happened to his parents. He doesn't dare to ask because they told him that local security forces were monitoring them.</p> <p>"Those who live abroad are also very scared," said Eric Liu, a censorship analyst at China Digital Times, a website that monitors Chinese internet controls. He said that Chinese users on Twitter were becoming increasingly careful, and that many set their accounts to private mode out of fear. Mr. Liu's account is public, but he screens new followers, looking for Chinese security officials who might be watching him.</p> <p>For Ms. Chen, the police harassment has continued even after she moved to Europe this fall for graduate school. She has struggled with feelings of shame and powerlessness as she has weighed the importance of expressing her political views against the risks that now entails. It has driven a rift in her relationship with her mother, who was adamant that she change her ways.</p> <p>Ms. Chen said that as long as she held a Chinese passport she would worry about her safety. As a young person with little work experience and less influence, she said it was frustrating to have her voice taken away: "I feel weak, like there's no way for me to show my strength, no way to do something for others."</p> <p>Even so, she said she would continue to post, albeit with more caution.</p> <p>"Even though it is still dangerous, I have to move forward step by step," she said. "I can't just keep censoring myself. I have to stop cowering."</p>
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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	01/03 IS attack near Syria oil wells kill 9 troops
SOURCE	https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/01/03/is-syria-oil-well/
GIST	<p>Jihadist fighters killed nine Syrian soldiers and allied militiamen in an ambush near oil installations in eastern Syria, a war monitor reported Monday.</p> <p>"Nine army soldiers and allied militia fighters were killed in an ambush by the Islamic State" group near oil wells, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported.</p> <p>The attack was carried out late Sunday in a remote region on the edge of the eastern province of Deir Ezzor where jihadist units have their hideouts, the monitor said.</p> <p>The rocket attack on a convoy also left 15 pro-government fighters wounded, the UK-based organisation said.</p> <p>The Syrian state news agency <i>SANA</i> reported five dead in an IS ambush on a military convoy.</p> <p>The jihadist organization, which once reigned over a sprawling proto-state straddling swathes of Iraq and Syria, lost its last fixed positions in March 2019 but its remnants have kept up deadly guerrilla-style attacks.</p> <p>Since the defeat of its self-proclaimed "caliphate", IS attacks have killed close to 1,800 government and allied forces in Syria.</p> <p>An IS attack on a bus on December 2 killed 10 oil field workers in Deir Ezzor province, the latest in a string of attacks targeting the oil sector.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/02 Rival terror groups use anime porn weapon
SOURCE	https://www.thedailybeast.com/terror-supporters-are-using-anime-porn-to-fight-virtual-battles-on-facebook
GIST	<p>The Facebook group “Soldiers of the Righteous Caliphate” was a bubbling cauldron of noxious extremist support drawn from rival groups including the Islamic State, and the Taliban. It was filled with beheading imagery, military exercises, hand-drawn faceless portraits of the late ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and—somehow—plenty of anime porn.</p> <p>With just over 24,000 members, the Facebook group represented a perfect case study in the malicious mix of extremist support on the platform, which continues to evade detection and gain traction. So why was it full of pornography?</p> <p>There has been plenty of analysis about extremist groups and how their content evades detection, but not many reports have focused on the antics of people trying to fight these extremists online. Some of these vigilantes are lone actors, others are part of “cyberarmies” aligned with other extremist groups fighting rival terrorist supporters online.</p> <p>The “Soldiers of the Righteous Caliphate” group was a microcosm of vigilante digital detractors at play. It was the digital equivalent of a wrestling cage match between cyberarmies of extremist group supporters targeting the Islamic State, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham and the Taliban.</p> <p>The battlefields of these cyberarmies and the conflict they spurred in weaponized group posts and comment sections represents one of the lesser known moderation challenges for Facebook.</p> <p>Their weapons of choice: anime porn and numbered kama sutra positions. Put simply, when terrorist supporters go violent on Facebook, their enemies tend to go pornographic.</p> <p>For instance, a 15-position numbered Kama Sutra menu of sex acts was recently shared with a post that read “the army of the Caliphate is on the path set by Hind, daughter of Abu Sufyan.” Some sex posters in the group used more straightforward messaging. Using a police line-up of naked female anime characters, each with progressively larger busts, one detractor derided the “dogs of hell,” a well-known Middle Eastern moniker for Islamic State supporters.</p> <p>Other lone actor vigilantes targeting the Taliban supporters in the group made sexual references about the Taliban, posting dancing videos of young Taliban fighters with emojis that represented index fingers into OK signs as a means to suggest the Taliban were homosexuals who “love dark holes.” When Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham accounts posted adoring photos of Abu Muhammad al-Joulani, the group’s leader, a non-extremist account, posted a doctored photo of him having sex with himself, in reference what some to believe is his narcissistic nature.</p> <p>The question, however, is just how networked are these posters? Does it indicate the presence of cyberarmies, or are these just average people with a taste for shitposting terrorist supporters?</p> <p>The answer is both.</p> <p>All of these explicit prevention efforts are often used by the most fringe of the terrorist group detectors as well as networks of opposing extremist groups on Facebook. The answer to why these tactics are utilized is buried in a large tranche of internal Facebook documents released in late October to 12 media organizations, which The Daily Beast has reviewed. Prepared in December 2020, the issues noted by Facebook employees actually provide researchers with a better understanding of how networks of anti-extremist accounts, as well as the cyberarmies supportive of a range of extremist groups, operate on the platform to take on terrorist content when the platform does not.</p> <p>In the papers, the Middle East and North Africa Integrity Team at Facebook reported that “Iraq is a proxy for cyberarmies working on reporting content in order to block certain pages or content.” The papers went on to mention that “reporters in Iraq understand the zero tolerance FB has for CN [child nudity] and this is used by cyberarmies to close certain pages.”</p>

While none of the lone actors or the extremist cyberarmies fighting one another in the “Soldiers of the Righteous Caliphate” used child nudity or children as extremist repellents, a number did use pornographic material to troll extremists and attempt to get their accounts banned.

Averaging 259 posts a day, the “Soldiers of the Righteous Caliphate” was essentially the Golden Corral buffet for a range of dueling jihadists groups across the platform and the occasional, loosely network band of do-gooders. Using the group as a case study, it’s clear that some of these accounts are just simply friends who’ve had enough of extremist content on the platform and have banded together, while others are members of cyberarmies affiliated with extremist groups intent on dominating the platform and knocking out their competition. Many of them claim to be based in Iraq, Syria and other locations across the Middle East and North Africa.

By following the accounts, and systematically going through their friends, followers and likes, The Daily Beast was able to assess who were linked to cyberarmies and who were loosely constructed members of vigilante Facebookers. What is clear is that many of those involved in posting the sexually charged material were members of the Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Force political party pages in Iraq. Even more obvious are the networks of Taliban, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, and Islamic State supporters on the platform that are part of those cyberarmies.

Although they each hate each other, the Taliban supporters—through large groups of their own—and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham supporters, also linked to groups of their own, equally detest the Islamic State, and have formed virtual armies to both troll and ban the Islamic State off the platform.

Meanwhile, individuals who seethe at the thought of extremists sharing content space on the world’s largest social media network take them all on by photo-bombing them in shared spaces with explicit posts. There is actually a history to these antics. Back in 2016, members of Anonymous, the shadowy hacker collective, dumped pornography into the timelines of Islamic State supporters on Twitter. In September 2020, infiltrators spammed porn into Telegram channels manned by Islamic State supporters, who grew frustrated with their inability to get rid of the content.

This, of course, reads and looks like quite childish antics to the casual observer, and isn’t necessarily effective, but it adds an element of circus theatrics to the challenge of blunting terrorist support on the platform.

Facebook took down the groups when reported by The Daily Beast. A spokesperson for Meta, Facebook’s parent company, said it doesn’t “allow terrorists on our platform,” and that it removes “content that praises, represents or supports them whenever we find it.”

Ultimately, scrolling through the Facebook group’s timeline reveals not just the [lapses in content moderation on a regional level](#), but also gaps in moderating terrorist content that is explicitly forbidden by the platform’s own community standards.

What’s clear, for now, is that in the darkest corners of Facebook, one man’s porn is another man’s terrorist repellent—and there seems to be no end to this bizarre phenomenon in sight.

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HEADLINE	12/30 NY: 600 counterterrorism exercises 2021
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/governor-hochul-announces-completion-of-more-than-600-counterterrorism-exercises/
GIST	New York Governor Kathy Hochul has announced the State Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services’ (DHSES) Office of Counter Terrorism conducted training exercises at more than 600 locations statewide in 2021. Counterterrorism experts from state and local agencies completed exercises assessing the ability of businesses to recognize and report suspicious activity in nearly every county in the state. More than 4,200 exercises have been conducted across New York since 2016.

“As Governor, I always want to ensure New Yorkers are safe and prepared for any and all risks that threaten our collective security,” Governor Hochul said. “These annual exercises are critical to this effort as they not only help ensure businesses statewide know how to spot suspicious activity, but understand their own responsibilities and how to make a report as well.”

The Office of Counter Terrorism partnered with more than 360 law enforcement personnel from 76 agencies to conduct the exercises. Teams conducted exercises at a wide range of businesses that offer products or services that could be used in potential terrorist plots. In 2021, teams worked with hardware and building supply stores; hotels and motels; big box retailers; rental vehicle companies; private postal facilities; UAS or drone retailers; agricultural supply stores; grocery stores; beauty and nail supply stores; pool supply stores; self-storage facilities, and gun shops and shows. Teams also assessed 70 critical infrastructure locations that terrorists could exploit or target for an attack. Location examples included malls and shopping centers, colleges and universities, airports, transit hubs, performance venues and other mass-gathering locations.

State Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services Acting Commissioner Jackie Bray said, “Our Division is committed to helping protect the citizens of New York, as well as the state’s critical infrastructure locations, from acts of terrorism. I thank all those involved in these exercises and our partners in law enforcement for helping raise awareness of the key indicators of suspicious activity. I urge businesses and the public to be mindful of their surroundings and to report suspicious activity to the New York State Terrorism Tip Line at 1-866-SAFENYS.”

State Police Superintendent Kevin P. Bruen said, “Educating businesses and the public on how to spot suspicious activity and notify law enforcement is a critical part of protecting our communities from the threat of terrorism. We are committed to doing everything necessary to ensure local and state first responders are ready to respond to, and mitigate, any type of emergency situation. Exercises like this help us to better our existing safety protocols and help us prepare to work hand in hand if disaster should strike and ultimately, keeps New Yorkers safe.”

In addition to the more than 600 exercises, the Division also partnered with federal, state and local law enforcement agencies in “Operation NY-SECURE” to conduct counterterrorism and incident response details along Amtrak routes and MTA commuter lines. The Operation’s goal is to improve coordination and response between the railroad police agencies responsible for each station, and the state and local law enforcement agencies that respond to emergencies at those locations. These visible, proactive details included heightened platform patrols, increased security presence onboard trains, explosive detection canine sweeps and counter-surveillance measures. In 2021, Operation NY-SECURE completed 74 details across the state. Teams conducted 62 single station details across the state, and 12 multi-station exercises at Amtrak and MTA stations along the Empire Line. Since the program’s inception in 2018, law enforcement teams have conducted more than 215 details across the state. The details will continue in 2022.

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HEADLINE	01/02 HTS: former AQ affiliate seeks softer brand
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/02/syria-idlib-hts-qaeda-militants/
GIST	<p>IDLIB, Syria — The Islamist militants attacked the radio station for years, because it played music, because it hired women, because its liberal values posed a challenge to Syria’s zealous men with guns.</p> <p>Lately, though, the attacks on the station have stopped, and its tormentor — a militant group once affiliated with al-Qaeda called Hayat Tahrir al-Sham — is trying to convince Syrians and the world it is no longer as radical or repressive as it once was.</p> <p>The group, also referred to as HTS, gained notoriety a decade ago as the most formidable Islamist rebel formation trying to topple the government of President Bashar al-Assad. The organization came to represent the dark forces metastasizing during Syria’s civil war: a jihadist movement that drew extremist fighters from around the world and sought to establish an Islamic state.</p>

Now the group says its focus has shifted to providing services to millions of people in Syria's rebel-held Idlib province through a fledgling government. It severed ties with al-Qaeda five years ago and says it is cracking down on other extremist groups. The founder of HTS, a veteran jihadist once seemingly ubiquitous in military fatigues, these days is photographed wearing suits.

"That faction that used to harass us is trying to show people that they are moderate," said Abdullah Klido, the chief executive of the radio station, called Radio Fresh. "They are trying to organize things so they appear in the image of a state."

The unfolding experiment in Idlib provides a rare look at how a militant movement transforms — and rebrands — to survive.

HTS has been pragmatic, recognizing that it needs to cultivate local support, analysts said. It has been calculating, using rhetoric about combating extremism in the hope of appealing to the United States and other governments that still classify it as a terrorist group.

Its goal is to ensure its prominence among the constellation of parties vying for power in a post-conflict Syria by making itself "irreplaceable," said Orwa Ajjoub, a senior analyst at the Center for Operational Analysis and Research, a political risk consultancy.

Many in Idlib have been left to wonder about the state the militants are building at breakneck speed but with little or no input from the public.

The province has been transformed — not yet into a state but a place settling into ordered routines. Traffic officers stand at intersections. Buses ferry schoolchildren and commuters. Citizens line up at ministries or utility companies, on errands necessary and mundane.

But Idlib's rulers have been less effective at easing the hardships of everyday life in an enclave where sprawling tent encampments are home to vast numbers of displaced Syrians. The government has failed to steady inflation, and it sparked protests by imposing taxes on olive farmers to augment revenue from import levies. Journalists and others who criticize the government or HTS continue to be arrested for doing so.

Osama Shuman, a 24-year-old rebel fighter on leave from the front, departed a dilapidated public building here on a recent afternoon after registering his marriage, a task that would have been impossible just a few years earlier.

In some ways, it was an empty gesture. The government that recorded the marriage is recognized by no country in the world. Nor did this service solve Shuman's most urgent problem, which is poverty; he and fifteen family members live crowded together in an unfinished apartment, he said.

But as he stood outside the civil registry ministry, he seemed satisfied by what his errand symbolized.

"There is change," he said.

The militants evolve

Attacks on Radio Fresh were a constant after the outlet's founding in 2013. The station broadcast music, news and warnings to civilians about government airstrikes. For its troubles, it was bombed by the Syrian military and raided by a variety of Islamist militant groups including the al-Nusra Front, the hard-line militia that eventually became HTS.

Klido, the station's chief executive, was among many in Idlib who had carefully watched the group's evolution, beginning with its earliest days as a movement founded in 2011 by Syrian jihadists bent on toppling the Damascus government. He initially saw the group as part of the Syrian revolution — or at

least working toward the same goal as more-liberal anti-government opponents like himself who wanted Assad deposed.

“They were there at the beginning. They were famous for fighting. They were very much liked by the public,” he said in a recent interview at the station’s basement offices.

Within a few years, human rights organizations were documenting atrocities associated with the group, including suicide bombings that killed civilians, torture and summary executions. The al-Nusra Front started to “have conflicts with other armed factions, and they all started eating each other,” Klido said. Those conflicts, in the eyes of the rebel groups, “became bigger than the revolution.”

That violent era began to retreat a few years ago, but not before it claimed another victim from Radio Fresh: the station’s founder, Raed Fares, who was killed in 2018 along with a colleague when gunmen sprayed his car with bullets. His colleagues blamed HTS, which denied it was responsible.

For the moment at least, the threat from various rebel factions has eased. “Now, only one faction is in control,” Klido said, referring to HTS. And it seems eager to win public approval.

In one sign of that effort, morality police officers who used to operate with impunity, separating couples and harassing women for their dress, are no longer visible on the streets, he said. But if the militants have eased up on mandating religious ideology, they have doubled down on bureaucracy.

Radio Fresh’s journalists have struggled to obtain press cards, which are now required by a new media directorate. To conduct reporting, such as visiting courts, “we need 100 approvals,” Klido said.

“Anyhow,” he added, “some organization is better than chaos.”

Experiment in governing

The centerpiece of HTS’s rebranding effort is the Salvation Government, which has ministries overseeing health, education and other services to the public. The militant group decided to set up this government while breaking away from al-Qaeda, and as HTS started to sideline hard-liners within the movement “who thought that transnational jihad was their only option,” Ajjoub said.

“There was this question about how to rule,” he said. As HTS sought to end its status as an international pariah, it “wanted to show it has control of the local population and is solving problems,” he said.

Israeli airstrikes in Syria targeted chemical weapons facilities, officials say

But from the start, there has been skepticism that the government is anything more than a front for HTS. There have been doubts, too, about whether it has the capacity to manage a province that would test even the most capable governors. Idlib is still riven by war, and about 2 million people — half the population — are displaced and struggling to find food and shelter.

Mohammed Khalid, a spokesman for HTS, described the relationship between the group and the government as a “partnership” and said it was conceived in 2016 to provide a decent life to Idlib’s residents as well as to show there was an “alternative to the regime” in Damascus.

The authorities go to great lengths to portray the government as independent from HTS. When reporters recently visited the civil registry ministry and asked why there were fliers on several walls soliciting fighters for HTS, officials said the posters were “old.”

Within half an hour, the fliers had been taken down.

Governing has proved to be a struggle. The education ministry oversees schooling for some half a million students in crumbling or damaged buildings and overcrowded classrooms. Thousands of teachers essentially work as volunteers, since the government does not have the funds to pay them more than a

nominal sum each month, said the minister, Bassam Sahyouni. “If we leave children without education, they will be ignorant and fall to extremism,” he said.

The curriculum in the schools includes standard subjects such as science, math, English and history, and was shaped in consultation with international partners like UNICEF, he said. There has been no effort to inject religious ideology into the curriculum, he said.

The schools, however, are making at least one concession to the ultraconservative tide and moving to segregate classrooms by gender, beginning in the first grade, he said.

At the interior ministry, the uneasy division of authority between the government and HTS is apparent. The ministry is nominally in control of some security functions, like regulating traffic rules and managing criminal investigations. But other security matters — like those related to “national security” — fall under the purview of HTS, according to the minister, Ahmed Latouf.

Issues related to “war and peace, and the economy,” remain firmly under HTS control, said Ajjoub, one of several scholars who have argued that authoritarianism is becoming the group’s defining characteristic. HTS has used its authority to crack down on rival rebel groups, including extremist factions, and to detain foreign jihadists operating in Idlib, he said. But it has also pursued those it considers its enemies, including ordinary critics.

After a journalist named Adham Dacharni wrote a Facebook post a few months ago complaining that the government was refusing to grant him a press card, he received a summons to come to the information ministry, he said. When he refused, he was summoned for interrogation and eventually called before a military court.

Dacharni’s interrogators asked why he had made disrespectful comments about the Salvation Government and accused him of being in contact with others who had criticized HTS, he said in a telephone interview. During his trial, he was held in a prison in an electricity building in Idlib city — one of many detention centers that human rights groups say the government and HTS have refused to officially acknowledge.

He was released after serving a sentence of 15 days in prison. Dacharni, who had criticized HTS on Facebook in the past, said the light sentence had not changed his opinion of the group.

“But now I am more careful,” he said.

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HEADLINE	01/03 Taliban crackdown on sale of alcohol
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/03/afghan-agents-pour-3000-litres-of-alcohol-into-kabul-canal-amid-crackdown
GIST	<p>A team of Afghan intelligence agents poured about 3,000 litres of liquor into a canal in Kabul, the country’s spy agency has said, as the new Taliban authorities crack down on the sale of alcohol.</p> <p>Video footage released by the General Directorate of Intelligence showed its agents pouring alcohol stored in barrels into the canal after seizing it during a raid in the capital.</p> <p>“Muslims have to seriously abstain from making and delivering alcohol,” a religious scholar said in the video, posted by the agency on Twitter.</p> <p>It was not clear when the raid was carried out or exactly when the alcohol was destroyed, but a statement issued by the agency on Sunday said three dealers were arrested during the operation.</p> <p>Selling and consuming alcohol was banned even under the previous Western-backed regime but the Taliban, known for their austere brand of Islam, are stricter in their opposition to it.</p>

	<p>Since the Islamists seized power on 15 August, the frequency of raids, including on drug addicts, has increased across the country.</p> <p>The Taliban government's ministry for promotion of virtue and prevention of vice has also issued several guidelines restricting women's rights.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/03 Armed drones shot down Baghdad airport
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/coalition-armed-drones-shot-baghdad-airport-82048830
GIST	<p>BAGHDAD -- Two armed drones were shot down at the Baghdad airport on Monday, a U.S.-led coalition official said, an attack that coincides with the anniversary of the 2020 U.S. killing of a top Iranian general.</p> <p>There were no reports of damage or injuries from the incident, which was also confirmed by an Iraqi security official.</p> <p>The official with the U.S.-led international coalition fighting the Islamic State group in Iraq told The Associated Press that the C-RAM defense system at the Baghdad Diplomatic Support Center engaged two fixed wing "suicide drones." The C-RAM system protects American installations in Iraq.</p> <p>"This was a dangerous attack on a civilian airport," the coalition official said.</p> <p>The Iraqi security official who confirmed the incident said the drones were headed toward a U.S. base at Baghdad airport housing U.S. advisors.</p> <p>No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack. Both officials spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations.</p> <p>The 2020 U.S. drone strike at Baghdad's airport killed Gen. Qassim Soleimani, who was the head of Iran's elite Quds Force, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of Iran-backed militias in Iraq known as the Popular Mobilization Forces.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/31 Won in Afghanistan? Private contractors
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/who-won-in-afghanistan-private-contractors-troops-withdrawal-war-pentagon-11640988154?mod=hp_lead_pos11
GIST	<p>The U.S. lost its 20-year campaign to transform Afghanistan. Many contractors won big.</p> <p>Those who benefited from the outpouring of government money range from major weapons manufacturers to entrepreneurs. A California businessman running a bar in Kyrgyzstan started a fuel business that brought in billions in revenue. A young Afghan translator transformed a deal to provide forces with bed sheets into a business empire including a TV station and a domestic airline.</p> <p>Two Army National Guardsmen from Ohio started a small business providing the military with Afghan interpreters that grew to become one of the Army's top contractors. It collected nearly \$4 billion in federal contracts, according to publicly available records.</p> <p>Four months after the last American troops left Afghanistan, the U.S. is assessing the lessons to be learned. Among those, some officials and watchdog groups say, is the reliance on battlefield contractors and how that adds to the costs of waging war.</p> <p>Since the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, military outsourcing helped push up Pentagon spending to \$14 trillion, creating opportunities for profit as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq stretched on.</p> <p>One-third to half of that sum went to contractors, with five defense companies— Lockheed Martin Corp. , Boeing Co. , General Dynamics Corp. , Raytheon Technologies Corp. and Northrop Grumman Corp. —</p>

taking the lion's share, \$2.1 trillion, for weapons, supplies and other services, according to Brown University's Costs of War Project, a group of scholars, legal experts and others that aims to draw attention to what it calls the hidden impact of America's military.

A panoply of smaller companies also made billions of dollars with efforts including training Afghan police officers, building roads, setting up schools and providing security to Western diplomats.

During the past two decades, both Republican and Democratic administrations saw the use of contractors as a way to keep the numbers of troops and casualties of service members down, current and former officials said.

When fighting a war with an all-volunteer military smaller than in past conflicts, and without a draft, "you have to outsource so much to contractors to do your operations," said Christopher Miller, who deployed to Afghanistan in 2005 as a Green Beret and later became acting defense secretary in the final months of the Trump administration.

The large amounts of money being spent on the war effort and on rebuilding Afghanistan after years of conflict strained the U.S. government's ability to vet contractors and ensure the money was spent as intended.

The U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, created to monitor the almost \$150 billion in spending on rebuilding the country, catalogued in hundreds of reports waste and, at times, fraud. A survey the office released in early 2021 found that, of the \$7.8 billion in projects its inspectors examined, only \$1.2 billion, or 15%, was spent as expected on new roads, hospitals, bridges, and factories. At least \$2.4 billion, the report found, was spent on military planes, police offices, farming programs and other development projects that were abandoned, destroyed or used for other purposes.

The Pentagon spent \$6 million on a project that imported nine Italian goats to boost Afghanistan's cashmere market. The project never reached scale. The U.S. Agency for International Development gave \$270 million to a company to build 1,200 miles of gravel road in Afghanistan. The USAID said it canceled the project after the company built 100 miles of road in three years of work that left more than 125 people dead in insurgent attacks.

Maj. Rob Lodewick, a Pentagon spokesman, said the "dedicated support offered by many thousands of contractors to U.S. military missions in Afghanistan served many important roles to include freeing up uniformed forces for vital war fighting efforts."

John Sopko, the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction since 2012, who documented the failures of contractors for years, said that many of them were doing their best to fulfill the demands placed on them by policymakers who made poor decisions.

"It's so easy with a broad brush to say that all contractors are crooks or war profiteers," said Mr. Sopko. "The fact that some of them made a lot of money—that's the capitalist system."

American use of military contractors stretches back to the Revolutionary War, when the Continental Army relied on private firms to provide supplies and even carry out raids on ships. During World War II, for every seven service members, one contractor served the war effort, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

More recently, the practice took off in the 1990s, around the time of the Gulf War. Then the decision after 9/11 to prosecute a global war on terror caught the Pentagon short-handed, coming after a post-Cold War downsizing of the American military.

In 2008, the U.S. had 187,900 troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, the peak of the U.S. deployment, and 203,660 contractor personnel.

The ratio of contractors to troops went up. When President Barack Obama ordered most U.S. troops to leave Afghanistan at the end of his second term, more than 26,000 contractors were in Afghanistan, compared with 9,800 troops.

By the time President Donald Trump left office four years later, 18,000 contractors remained in Afghanistan, along with 2,500 troops.

“Contracting seems to be moving in only one direction—increasing—regardless of whether there is a Democrat or Republican in the White House,” said Heidi Peltier, program manager at the Costs of War Project.

Ms. Peltier said the reliance on contractors has led to the rise of the “camo economy,” in which the U.S. government camouflages the costs of war that might reduce public support for it.

More than 3,500 U.S. contractors died in Afghanistan and Iraq, according to statistics from the Labor Department that it says are incomplete. More than 7,000 American service members died during two decades of war.

One entrepreneur who found an opportunity was Doug Edelman, who hails from Stockton, Calif., and opened a bar and a fuel-trading business in the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek in 1998. Three years later, when the war began in neighboring Afghanistan, Bishkek morphed into a hub for U.S. troops and supplies. Mr. Edelman teamed up with a Kyrgyz partner to run two companies, Red Star and Mina Corp., which became vital links in the war effort, former colleagues said.

After winning a series of Pentagon single-source contracts, which allow the Pentagon to bypass the conventional bidding process, those colleagues said, Mr. Edelman’s firms supplied fuel for a Bishkek-based fleet of U.S. Air Force C-135 air tankers that performed midair refueling operations over Afghanistan. Inside Afghanistan, his company built a fuel pipeline at Bagram Air Base.

His companies won billions of dollars in contracts, and Mr. Edelman earned hundreds of millions of dollars, according to a lawsuit filed in California in 2020 by a former colleague who said he was later cut out from equity in one of Mr. Edelman’s businesses. Mr. Edelman took up residence in the London mansion that once belonged to former media mogul Conrad Black, according to court filings and the former colleagues.

Mr. Edelman denied the allegations in his response to the lawsuit. He declined to comment.

The Mission Essential Group, the Ohio-based company that grew to become the Army’s leading provider of war zone interpreters in Afghanistan, exemplifies the arc of contracting in Afghanistan.

Mission Essential got its start in 2003 after two Army National Guardsmen, Chad Monnin and Greg Miller, commiserated in an Arabic language class over what they considered the poor quality of interpreters used by the military, and wanted to do better.

In 2007 it won a five-year, \$300 million contract to provide the Army with interpreters and cultural advisers in Afghanistan.

The company grew rapidly. Mr. Monnin, who former Mission Essential employees said had been known to sleep in his car to save money on hotel rooms, moved into a 6,400-square-foot, \$1.3 million dollar home next to a country club golf course, according to public records. He bought a classic 1970s Ferrari sports car.

While interpreters were well-paid when the contracts were flush, former Mission Essential employees said, the pay for Afghans decreased as the business contracted.

As the military mission in Afghanistan began to scale back in 2012, Mission Essential said there was pressure to reduce costs. Mission Essential said it renegotiated contracts with Afghan linguists that reduced average monthly pay by about 20-to-25%.

Average monthly income for Afghan linguists fell from about \$750 in 2012 to \$500 this year, the company said.

“They were taking in billions from the U.S. government,” said Anees Khalil, an Afghan-American linguist who worked for a Mission Essential subcontractor for several months. “The way they were treating linguists was very inhumane.”

He and other former employees said some Afghan linguists working alongside U.S. soldiers in the toughest parts of the country were paid as little as \$300 a month. The company said it had no records that anyone was paid \$300 a month when working full-time.

Mission Essential said its interpreters were “extremely well paid compared to average incomes in the market” and that the company put a priority on ensuring they were well cared for. Mission Essential said it went to great lengths up until the very end to help its employees in Afghanistan escape Taliban rule.

“Supporting this work is not about profits,” said Mr. Miller. “It’s about preserving our national security and our American way of life.”

In January 2010, an Afghan interpreter working for Mission Essential on an Army Special Forces base near Kabul grabbed a gun and killed two U.S. soldiers. The families of the two soldiers killed—Capt. David Thompson and Specialist Marc Decoteau—along with Chief Warrant Officer Thomas Russell, who was injured, filed suit, accusing Mission Essential of failing to properly screen and oversee the interpreter. The families said their lawsuit aimed to get the government to address what they called inadequate supervision of contractors.

“These contracts are extremely lucrative and in our opinion financial considerations could have outweighed the proper performance of contract requirements,” said the families in a statement.

The two sides settled the suit in 2015 for undisclosed terms.

Mr. Miller called the 2010 shooting a “total tragedy,” and said it was the sole such incident in 17 years of the company’s work in war zones. He said Mission Essential had been cleared by the Army of any criminal culpability for the attack. The Army declined to comment.

By the end of 2010, Mission Essential said it employed nearly 7,000 linguists working with the U.S. military in Afghanistan. It made more than \$860 million in revenue from the Defense Department in 2012.

As the troop surge wound down, Mission Essential’s federal contracts fell, according to public records. Mr. Miller said he and Mr. Monnin had different visions for how the company should grow. Mr. Monnin, who declined to comment on his work at Mission Essential, agreed to sell his share of the company to Mr. Miller.

Divisions also erupted between Mr. Miller and two board members in an unresolved lawsuit filed in 2018. Their suit accused Mr. Miller of hiring unqualified relatives, spending millions in company money on personal matters, having the company pay him \$1 million for an airplane to fly his family members around and taking \$500,000 a year in salary without board approval.

Mr. Miller said Mission Essential is a family business and that two of his brothers work for the company in positions they are “highly qualified” to fill. He said that the plane was used by executives to travel to business meetings around the country and was sold when it was no longer needed.

	<p>Mr. Miller denied the allegations and accused the board members in court filings of trying to use Mission Essential as their personal cash machine and of using illegal drugs, putting the company's role as a federal contractor at risk. Mr. Miller accused the pair of using the courts to try and secure a better deal for giving up their stake in the company.</p> <p>Those counterclaims are “unfounded and blatantly false,” said Katherine Connor Ferguson, the attorney for the board members, Scott Humphrys and Chris Miller, who isn't related to Greg Miller.</p> <p>By the time President Biden ordered the last American troops to leave Afghanistan in August, Mission Essential had cut its staff to about 1,000. Almost 90 employees were killed during the war, Mr. Miller said. The last 22 in Afghanistan worked alongside U.S. forces and flew out of Kabul on the final few plane loads of America's troops in August, he said.</p> <p>By then, Mr. Miller was working to reposition Mission Essential. The company secured a \$12 million contract to provide the Army with interpreters in Africa and worked to diversify by buying a technology company.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/31 Pentagon flaws civilian casualty dismissals
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/31/us/pentagon-airstrikes-syria-iraq.html
GIST	<p>The report that came to the attention of the United States military in April 2017 relayed devastating news from Iraq: More than 30 people, among them women and children, had been killed when aircraft from the American-led coalition fighting the Islamic State in Mosul struck a neighborhood known as Siha.</p> <p>A civilian casualty cell of the U.S. military, which was charged with assessing reports of civilians killed or wounded in coalition operations, learned of the claim in a Facebook post published on April 11 by the news outlet, the Iraqi Spring Media Center.</p> <p>The Pentagon began an inquiry, but only a week later its assessment officers couldn't confirm whether coalition aircraft had targeted that location, and they dismissed the claim, saying Siha was not among “known districts of West Mosul.” There would be no further review.</p> <p>But Siha wasn't hard to find.</p> <p>Reporters from The New York Times were able to locate the west Mosul neighborhood using just Google Maps. The name appeared slightly different, as “Sihah” instead of “Siha,” a spelling variation that is common when Arabic words are written in English.</p> <p>Additionally, a simple Google search revealed several news reports published before April 2017, verifying the existence of Siha and its approximate location.</p> <p>An analysis of confidential Pentagon documents by The Times's Visual Investigations unit found that a number of allegations of civilian casualties had been dismissed as “noncredible” based on flawed reviews of evidence — oversights that Times reporters were able to detect using resources widely available to the public. That included websites like Google Maps and Wikimapia, a crowdsourced mapping platform.</p> <p>Typically, U.S. military assessors have access to far more robust resources, such as strike logs and video feeds of airstrikes.</p> <p>“I'll tell you what it is: That's negligence,” said Marc Garlasco, a former Pentagon senior intelligence analyst. “That is plain and simple. It is the most basic level of investigation that they should be doing, and not to do it is completely negligent.”</p> <p>The Times obtained more than 1,300 confidential Pentagon assessments of allegations of civilian casualties in the American-led air war in the Middle East, between September 2014 and January 2018,</p>

during the height of the war against the Islamic State. Based on those documents, [The Times recently reported](#) patterns of failed intelligence, decision-making and execution behind deadly airstrikes.

These documents detail the [criteria and rationales](#) for how the Pentagon chose to classify civilian casualty allegations as either credible or noncredible.

A vast majority of assessments — more than 1,100 — were deemed noncredible. In some cases, there was not enough information for reviewers to search for airstrikes that might coincide with allegations or to conclude that civilian casualties occurred as a result of a coalition strike. However, The Times had found that many allegations of civilian casualties were erroneously dismissed for reasons ranging from insufficient quality and quantity of video to the inability to determine which of many strikes in an area was the subject of a claim.

This investigation focuses on reviewers' inability to establish details about the locations of strikes. In reviewing 80 assessments, including those with high numbers of reported civilian casualties, The Times repeatedly found what appeared to be simple mistakes. In a dozen instances, Pentagon assessors said that a location could not be identified, even though it was easily found on the internet, or they seemed to have just looked in the wrong place.

Following [recent revelations](#) in The Times about botched strikes by U.S. forces, the Pentagon has said that it is [committed to investigating its mistakes](#). But this examination raises further questions about the capability, or willingness, of the U.S. military to accurately count civilian casualties from its air war.

“The entire effort was really about responding to reports of civilian casualties in public and getting ahead of the narrative,” said Daniel Mahanty, one of the lead authors of a [2020 report](#) on how the United States assesses civilian casualty claims, and a former State Department official. “It was certainly not about doing anything differently to prevent harm as the operation proceeded.

Captain Bill Urban, spokesman for the U.S. Central Command, said the military “applies a policy of reviewing and assessing all reports of civilian harm, irrespective of their source, and where the information available warrants, conducting investigations, applying critical lessons learned, and acknowledging the civilian harm caused by our actions.” He did not comment on the specific errors identified by The Times’s investigation.

While the Pentagon reviews all allegations of civilian casualties, interviews with experts and current and former military personnel revealed systemic problems, including a lack of training, inaccurate airstrike logs and an overworked, rotating assessment team of usually only a few people.

There were significant inconsistencies in the quality of the assessments, pointing to a process whose success relied more on the skills and commitment of individual officers than on cohesive standards and methods.

The assessment process

A review into civilian casualty allegations can be prompted in several ways, including reports from the local news media and social media posts monitored by American military personnel. Most incidents [are flagged by Airwars](#), a nonprofit watchdog group based in Britain that collects reports and provides summaries from local sources.

The allegations are typically sent to the civilian casualty cell, whose members receive no standardized training to become assessors.

“Each brings to the task his/her own unique skills, and each are being constantly required to hone those skills over time,” said Captain Urban, the military spokesman.

One former assessment officer, who asked to remain anonymous out of concern for retribution by the U.S. military, said that he had never heard of the civilian casualty cell until receiving the assignment and that many of the skills required to review casualty claims had to be learned on the job.

The Pentagon's assessment process leaves a paper trail of confidential documents, including "initial assessment forms," filled out by the civilian casualty cell to determine if a claim warrants further investigation. Such inquiries are often conducted by the command that carried out the strike.

Assessors answer a series of yes or no questions to establish details about an allegation, including location and timing.

In assessing the 2017 claim from Siha in Mosul, reviewers did not appear to have consulted basic resources like Google Maps. In other assessments, they made significant efforts to review claims, using a wide variety of tools to review information.

When one allegation stated that a swimming pool had been targeted in Syria, assessment experts used satellite imagery to identify "all pools within Raqqa" to search for nearby strikes, showing a thoroughness that wasn't applied across the board.

If enough information is gathered, the final step of the initial assessment process is to check military records for airstrikes that may have hit the approximate location noted in an allegation. But the former assessment officer said those records could be inaccurate, making it difficult to pinpoint strikes.

Those concerns were confirmed by The Times's own ground reporting, which found many instances in which the logged coordinates for airstrikes were more than 500 yards from the actual site of impact. One was as far as five miles away.

Some officers noted these inaccuracies in the assessments, with [one writing](#) that the logs "shouldn't be used to identify strikes." Instead, the officer recommended searching reports by aircrews after missions — a cumbersome and rare practice.

Captain Urban said that strike logs had become more accurate, but he did not provide specific details about the improvements or whether previously dismissed allegations had been reassessed using improved logs.

Basic errors

Sometimes, Pentagon assessors simply misread the allegations, leading to the dismissal of a report.

In an assessment involving Hit, Iraq, Airwars and local sources said that an airstrike had killed two people and wounded three in "Al-Bab Al-Gharbi," which translates to "the Western Gate" and describes what the area is: the western entrance to the historical center of the city.

While the sources clearly referred to "Al-Bab Al-Gharbi" as a single neighborhood, the Pentagon reviewers incorrectly looked for "Al-Bab and Al-Gharbi," as if they were two distinct areas.

The assessment document shows that the military did carry out strikes in Hit that day, but the claim was dismissed because assessors were unable to find the location.

Captain Urban said the Pentagon could not provide any insight into how this allegation — or any of the others reviewed by The Times — had been evaluated because the assessors "have moved on to new assignments."

Inadequate Arabic skills

Documents show that even when precise information about the location of a reported strike was available, reviewers sometimes missed it because of a lack of Arabic skills.

In one assessment, the Pentagon deemed as noncredible an allegation that eight people had been killed, including four children, in part because it could not locate the Jerri neighborhood, also in Hit, Iraq.

The Jerri neighborhood can easily be found on [Wikimapia](#) — but only if searched for in Arabic.

Although assessors conducted some searches in Arabic, they did not do so routinely. Multiple people who worked on or with the civilian casualty cell told The Times that speaking or reading Arabic was not a requirement.

While Captain Urban said interpreters were available to assessors “where language skills are needed,” the review of documents suggested there were still oversights when it came to Arabic comprehension.

Mixing up locations

In some assessments, the Pentagon simply confused towns with the same or similar names and dismissed the claims, the documents show, as happened with a reported airstrike on a Syrian town in March 2017.

Several social media posts said that the strike had hit a neighborhood in Maskana, part of Aleppo Province in Syria, killing at least eight people. An internal Pentagon team flagged the claim for further review.

The documents show that assessors zeroed in on Maskana, but it was the wrong one. There is a town with the same name in Homs, a different province of Syria. The reviewers were unable to find correlating airstrikes, and the allegation was dismissed.

A few weeks later, military personnel dismissed another claim because they appeared to have mixed up two towns. According to a [tweet from a Syrian news outlet](#), the U.S.-led coalition bombed the village of Sabha in Deir al-Zour Province, killing or wounding about 50 people. Again, an internal group at the Pentagon alerted the assessment team.

Analysts reviewing the allegation looked for a village called Sabha in Deir al-Zour Province. They found one, and stopped there.

But there is another town with the same name close by. That town matches the nearby location of the reported strike described by a local resident in a news story.

In its dismissal of the allegation, the Pentagon said that “the nearest strikes [...] were 17 km away” from the Sabha the reviewers had focused on.

The possible strike location identified by Times reporters was almost exactly 17 kilometers away.

Ignoring evidence

The [Pentagon’s 2018 procedures](#) for assessing civilian harm prompts analysts to “narrow the date/time/location of the allegation using photo/video evidence.” But in multiple civilian casualty assessments, this wasn’t done, a shortcoming that resulted in assessment officers’ missing important pieces of evidence.

That’s what happened in the assessment of the Sanjari family in January 2017. Friends and relatives had gathered at the family’s home in Mosul to mourn the passing of Aziz Ahmed Aziz Sanjari, a retired Iraqi Army colonel. An explosion ripped through the gathering, killing civilians, according to initial social media and news reports.

Airwars sent the claim to the Pentagon and said that the attack had taken place at a funeral. It included a link to a video from the Amaq News Agency, a news outlet linked to the Islamic State.

Pentagon assessors appear to have wrongly assumed the strike happened at a cemetery in an area about a half-mile from the Sanjari house. In their dismissal, they wrote that “no strikes were found within 100 m of the cemetery boundaries.”

The analysts also reported that they were “unable to access” the video link that Airwars had included in the claim. Whether the link was accessible at the time is unclear, but the video was posted elsewhere online the day of the strike and was easy to find when the Pentagon did its assessment. And it’s still online to this day — a search that took five minutes on Twitter, using the term “Mosul” in Arabic and the date of the strike.

In not reviewing the Amaq video, the Pentagon missed a key piece of evidence showing that the airstrike had hit just outside a civilian home, not at a cemetery.

Interviews with the family in June 2021 and death certificates confirmed that 11 people had been killed, including an unidentified woman and a girl who were walking near the home.

Ridhwan Ahmed Aziz Sanjari, who lost two of his brothers and his cousin in the airstrike, told The Times, “I just wanted to know why.”

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HEADLINE	01/01 Military: IS cell behind attack Kabul airport
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/01/us/politics/afghan-war-isis-attack.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — Four months after an Islamic State suicide bomber killed scores of people, including 13 American service members, outside the airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, U.S. and foreign intelligence officials have pieced together a profile of the assailant.</p> <p>Military commanders say they are using that information to focus on an Islamic State cell that they believe was involved in the attack, including its leadership and foot soldiers. The cell members could be among the first insurgents struck by armed MQ-9 Reaper drones flying missions over Afghanistan from a base in the Persian Gulf. The United States has not carried out any airstrikes in the country since the last American troops left on Aug. 30.</p> <p>The attack at the airport’s Abbey Gate unfolded four days earlier, during the frenzied final days of the largest noncombatant evacuation ever conducted by the U.S. military. It was one of the deadliest attacks of the 20-year war in Afghanistan.</p> <p>The Islamic State identified the suicide bomber as Abdul Rahman Al-Logari. American officials say he was a former engineering student who was one of several thousand militants freed from at least two high-security prisons after the Taliban seized control of Kabul on Aug. 15. The Taliban emptied the facilities indiscriminately, releasing not only their own imprisoned members but also fighters from Islamic State Khorasan, or ISIS-K, the group’s branch in Afghanistan and the Taliban’s nemesis.</p> <p>“It’s hard to explain what the thinking was in letting out people who were a threat to the Taliban,” Edmund Fitton-Brown, a senior U.N. counterterrorism official, said at a recent security conference in Doha, Qatar.</p> <p>Mr. Logari was not unknown to the Americans. In 2017, the C.I.A. tipped off Indian intelligence agents that he was plotting a suicide bombing in New Delhi, U.S. officials said. Indian authorities foiled the attack and turned Mr. Logari over to the C.I.A., which sent him to Afghanistan to serve time at the Parwan prison at Bagram Air Base. He remained there until he was freed amid the chaos after Kabul fell.</p> <p>Eleven days later, on Aug. 26 at 5:48 p.m., the bomber, wearing a 25-pound explosive vest under his clothing, walked up to a group of American troops who were frisking those hoping to enter Hamid Karzai International Airport. He waited, military officials said, until he was about to be searched before detonating the bomb, which was unusually large for a suicide vest, killing himself and nearly 200 others.</p> <p>The attack raised ISIS-K’s international profile, and positioned it both as a major threat to the Taliban’s ability to govern the country and, according to American officials, as the most imminent terrorist risk to the United States coming out of Afghanistan.</p>

“The group has gained some notoriety in a way that could be quite compelling for them on the transnational stage,” Christine Abizaid, the director of the National Counterterrorism Center, said in October at [a national security conference in Sea Island, Ga.](#) “At the same time, they’re fighting the Taliban. How that force-on-force engagement in Afghanistan will go will have some defining characteristics about what the transnational threat looks like.”

In October, Colin H. Kahl, the under secretary of defense for policy, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that ISIS-K could be able to attack the United States sometime in 2022. “We could see ISIS-K generate that capability in somewhere between six and twelve months,” he said.

The Parwan prison at Bagram and the Pul-e-Charkhi prison near Kabul were the Afghan government’s two main high-security prisons. The United States built Parwan in 2009 and [transferred it to Afghan](#) government control three years later.

On July 1, with little warning and no public ceremony, [U.S. forces abandoned Bagram Air Base](#), the main hub for American military operations. Six weeks later, on Aug. 15, [Taliban fighters swept into the base](#) and threw open the prison gates.

The Taliban killed one prominent prisoner — a former top leader of the Islamic State in Afghanistan, Omar Khalid Khorasani — and released more than 12,000 others, including roughly 6,000 Taliban, 1,800 ISIS-K and nearly three dozen Qaeda fighters, according to U.S. officials.

“The fiasco in Afghanistan has put hundreds of terrorists back on the street,” said Bruce O. Riedel, a former C.I.A. officer who ran President Barack Obama’s first Afghanistan policy review.

One of them was Mr. Logari, the son of an Afghan merchant who frequently visited India and Pakistan for business. Mr. Logari moved to India in 2017 to study engineering at Manav Rachna University near New Delhi.

Recruited by ISIS-K, Mr. Logari was arrested in relation to the New Delhi plot and handed over to the C.I.A. by India’s foreign spy service, the Research and Analysis Wing, in September 2017, according to [Indian media reports](#) that were confirmed by American and Indian officials. A C.I.A. spokesman declined to comment.

Mr. Logari spent time in both the Pul-e-Charkhi and Parwan prisons, American officials said, but it is unclear how he linked up with the ISIS-K attack cell in Kabul, or why and how he came to be the Abbey Gate bomber.

Soon after the attack, however, [American officials](#) and [U.S. media reports](#) disclosed that the bomber had been released from prison just days earlier.

The Islamic State seized on the spectacular nature of the bombing, boasting about its size, location and timing in social media posts, according to the SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors jihadist media.

In the months since the attack, U.S. intelligence analysts and military officials say they have focused on learning more about the ISIS-K strike cell, and any future attacks it may be plotting against the West.

Created six years ago by disaffected Pakistani Taliban fighters, the group’s ranks fell to about 1,500 to 2,000 fighters last year, about half that of its peak in 2016 before U.S. airstrikes and Afghan commando raids took a toll, killing many of its leaders. In June 2020, an ambitious new commander, Shahab al-Muhajir, took over the group and has been trying to recruit Taliban fighters and other militants.

Even before the Abbey Gate bombing, ISIS-K had vastly increased the pace of its attacks in 2021, [a United Nations report concluded in June.](#)

	<p>The violence has strained Afghanistan's new and untested government and raised red flags in the West about the group's potential resurgence.</p> <p>President Biden and his top commanders have said the United States would carry out "over-the-horizon" strikes from a base in the United Arab Emirates against ISIS and Qaeda insurgents who threaten the United States.</p> <p>Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the head of the military's Central Command, said in early December that the departure of the U.S. military and intelligence assets from Afghanistan had made tracking the groups harder but "not impossible."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/31 Desperate: Afghan parents selling children
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-business-marriage-taliban-07933f71b06e4dfa5484e76a74292967
GIST	<p>SHEDAI CAMP, Afghanistan (AP) — In a sprawling settlement of mud brick huts in western Afghanistan housing people displaced by drought and war, a woman is fighting to save her daughter.</p> <p>Aziz Gul's husband sold their 10-year-old into marriage without telling his wife, taking a down-payment so he could feed his family of five children. Otherwise, he told her, they would all starve. He had to sacrifice one to save the rest.</p> <p>Many of Afghanistan's growing number of destitute people are making such desperate decisions as their nation spirals into a vortex of poverty.</p> <p>Afghanistan's aid-dependent economy was already teetering when the Taliban seized power in mid-August amid a chaotic withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops. The international community froze Afghanistan's assets abroad and halted funding, unwilling to work with a Taliban government given its reputation for brutality during its previous rule 20 years ago.</p> <p>The consequences have been devastating for a country battered by war, drought and the coronavirus pandemic. State employees haven't been paid in months. Malnutrition stalks the most vulnerable, and aid groups say more than half the population faces acute food shortages.</p> <p>"Day by day, the situation is deteriorating in this country, and especially children are suffering," said Asuntha Charles, national director of the World Vision aid organization in Afghanistan, which runs a health clinic for displaced people near the western city of Herat. "Today I have been heartbroken to see that the families are willing to sell their children to feed other family members."</p> <p>Arranging marriages for very young girls is common in the region. The groom's family pays money to seal the deal, and the child usually stays with her parents until she is at least around 15. Yet with many unable to afford even basic food, some say they'd allow prospective grooms to take very young girls or are even trying to sell their sons.</p> <p>Gul, unusually in this deeply patriarchal, male-dominated society, is resisting. Married off herself at 15, she says she would kill herself if her daughter, Qandi Gul, is taken away.</p> <p>When her husband told her he had sold Qandi, "my heart stopped beating. I wished I could have died at that time, but maybe God didn't want me to die," Gul said, with Qandi by her side peering shyly from beneath her sky-blue headscarf. "Each time I remember that night...I die and come back to life."</p> <p>Her husband told her he sold one to save the others, saying they all would have died otherwise.</p> <p>"Dying was much better than what you have done," she said she told him.</p> <p>Gul rallied her brother and village elders and with their help secured a "divorce" for Qandi, on condition she repays the 100,000 afghanis (about \$1,000) her husband received. It's money she doesn't have.</p>

Her husband fled, possibly fearing Gul might denounce him to authorities. The Taliban government recently banned forced marriages.

Gul says she isn't sure how long she can fend off the family of the prospective groom, a man of around 21.

"I am just so desperate. If I can't provide money to pay these people and can't keep my daughter by my side, I have said that I will kill myself," she said. "But then I think about the other children. What will happen to them? Who will feed them?" Her eldest is 12, her youngest - her sixth - just two months.

In another part of the camp, father-of-four Hamid Abdullah was also selling his young daughters into arranged marriages, desperate for money to treat his chronically ill wife, pregnant with their fifth child.

He can't repay money he borrowed to fund his wife's treatments, he said. So three years ago, he received a down-payment for his eldest daughter Hoshran, now 7, in an arranged marriage to a now 18-year-old.

The family who bought Hoshran are waiting until she is older before settling the full amount and taking her. But Abdullah needs money now, so he is trying to arrange a marriage for his second daughter, 6-year-old Nazia, for about 20,000-30,000 afghanis (\$200-\$300).

"We don't have food to eat," and he can't pay his wife's doctor, he said.

His wife, Bibi Jan, said they had no other option but it was a difficult decision. "When we made the decision, it was like someone had taken a body part from me."

In neighboring Badghis province, another displaced family is considering selling their son, 8-year-old Salahuddin.

His mother, Guldasta, said that after days with nothing to eat, she told her husband to take Salahuddin to the bazaar and sell him to bring food for the others.

"I don't want to sell my son, but I have to," the 35-year-old said. "No mother can do this to her child, but when you have no other choice, you have to make a decision against your will."

Salahuddin blinked and looked on silently, his lip quivering slightly.

His father, Shakir, blind in one eye and with kidney problems, said the children had been crying for days from hunger. Twice he decided to take Salahuddin to the bazaar, and twice he faltered. "But now I think I have no other choice."

Buying boys is believed to be less common than girls, and when it does take place, it appears to be cases families without sons buying infants. In her despair, Guldasta thought perhaps such a family might want an 8-year-old.

The desperation of millions is clear as more and more people face hunger, with some 3.2 million children under 5 years old facing acute malnutrition, according to the U.N.

Charles, World Vision's national director for Afghanistan, said humanitarian aid funds are desperately needed.

"I'm happy to see the pledges are made," she said. But the pledges "shouldn't stay as promises, they have to be seen as reality on the ground."

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SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/afghanistans-ashraf-ghani-defends-his-decision-to-escape-says-he-is-a-scapegoat-11640883496?mod=lead_feature_below_a_pos1
GIST	<p>Afghanistan's former President Ashraf Ghani said in his first broadcast interview since fleeing Kabul that he escaped abroad because his security detail had told him that it couldn't defend him. He added that he also sought to prevent the Afghan capital from becoming a battleground between rival Taliban factions.</p> <p>American officials, from President Biden down, as well as other leaders of the fallen Afghan republic, have pointed to Mr. Ghani's flight on Aug. 15 as the reason the Afghan state suddenly collapsed and diplomatic efforts for a peaceful transition imploded.</p> <p>Mr. Ghani broke more than four months of silence in an interview aired on Thursday by the British Broadcasting Corp. He was interviewed not by a staff BBC journalist but by Gen. Nick Carter, the recently retired head of the British armed forces. Gen. Carter dealt extensively with Mr. Ghani throughout his military career, which included a stint as deputy commander of U.S.-led coalition forces in Afghanistan. He was a guest editor on the flagship BBC morning radio show.</p> <p>In the interview, Mr. Ghani blamed the U.S. for the collapse in Afghanistan, saying that his government was cut out of negotiations with the Taliban. "They erased us," he said. He added that he should have followed the example of former President Hamid Karzai in refusing to cooperate so closely with Washington.</p> <p>"I trusted in our international partnership," said Mr. Ghani, "instead of confronting continuously like my predecessor."</p> <p>In the weeks before the fall of Kabul, Mr. Ghani vowed repeatedly that he was willing to die defending his country. In the BBC interview, he said that his security team told him that if he took a stand, they would all be killed.</p> <p>"On the morning of that day, I had no inkling that by late afternoon, I would be leaving," Mr. Ghani said. "I had to sacrifice myself in order to save Kabul."</p> <p>Mr. Ghani said that even as he boarded a helicopter out of Kabul on Aug. 15, he thought he would fly to the eastern city of Khost, apparently unaware that it had already fallen to the Taliban. Khost was the base of an anti-Taliban security force trained by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. He went instead to Uzbekistan and from there to the United Arab Emirates, where he remains. "I did not know where we would go," said Mr. Ghani.</p> <p>At the time, two different factions of the Taliban were closing in on Kabul. Mr. Ghani said he feared a "massive conflict" between them would destroy the city—which would have been a repeat of the civil war between the mujahedeen factions that fought over the Afghan capital in the early 1990s. There has been no open conflict between Taliban factions in the past four months.</p> <p>Afghanistan, now entirely under the control of the Taliban, is suffering an economic meltdown, in part because Mr. Ghani's departure scuttled plans for a negotiated transition of power. The new Taliban administration has found itself under U.S. sanctions, with over \$9 billion in Afghan central-bank assets frozen. More than half the population is facing starvation, according to the United Nations.</p> <p>Mr. Ghani's interview unleashed a deluge of anger from Afghans on social media. Haroun Rahimi, formerly a law professor at the now defunct American University of Afghanistan, called Mr. Ghani and his close aides "treasonous cowards." Abdullah Khenjani, a former deputy minister, called the interview an insult to the miseries of the Afghan people.</p> <p>In the BBC interview, Mr. Ghani blamed veteran American diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad, who negotiated the 2020 Doha agreement with the Taliban, for the Afghan republic's collapse. "Process-wide, outcome-wise, the responsibility has to clearly rest" with Mr. Khalilzad's team, he said. "It became an American,</p>

not an Afghan, issue....My life's work has been destroyed, my values have been trampled on and I've been made a scapegoat."

Mr. Ghani also dismissed as a Russian disinformation campaign the allegations that he fled Afghanistan with hundreds of millions of dollars. He said he welcomed a probe by John Sopko, the U.S. special inspector general for Afghanistan, into those accusations, saying he wanted the U.N. or a private investigator to conduct an inquiry.

"I would be delighted to have any kind of investigation, including taking a lie-detector test," said Mr. Ghani, adding that riches weren't in keeping with his lifestyle, so "What would I do with the money?"

On the same BBC show, Mr. Khalilzad said that culpability for the Taliban takeover was "first of all, a failure of the Afghan leadership," with Mr. Ghani running away and military leaders refusing to fight.

Mr. Khalilzad also said that it is an achievement in its own right that the war in Afghanistan, which was causing hundreds of deaths every day, is now over. "I'm pleased that the killing fields of Afghanistan are no more," he said.

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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	01/02 D.C. 2 nd warmest Dec caps 5 th warmest year
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2022/01/02/second-warmest-december-dc/
GIST	<p>December felt more like an extension of autumn rather than the start of winter, and, indeed, Washington's average temperature during the month was only 0.3 degrees colder than November.</p> <p>The average temperature of 47.6 degrees ran a strong 5.9 degrees higher than normal and was second only to 2015 in records dating to 1871. We hit 70 twice and experienced several record-high low temperatures. The mercury sank below freezing only four times.</p> <p>The mild December fit into a recent tendency for this month to be warm. Five of the 10 warmest Decembers on record have occurred since 2000.</p> <p>The toasty December helped 2021 close as the fifth-warmest year on record in Washington.</p> <p>It was warm, and it was dry. Little rain fell in the first half of December, and most precipitation held off until the month's tail end. The monthly rainfall total of 0.63 inches was the driest since 2017's half-inch and ranked as the sixth driest on record. The overall amount was 2.78 inches below normal. No measurable snow fell.</p> <p>The month featured several warm periods with only a few small tastes of winter. And even the few chillier-than-normal days still reached at least 40 degrees. Meanwhile, 10 of the 31 days reached at least 60 degrees.</p> <p>Numerous high-temperature records were set during the month.</p> <p>On Dec. 11:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Washington set a record high of 70, topping 68 from 1897.• Dulles set a record warm low of 46, topping 44 from 1965.• Baltimore set a record high of 70, topping 69 from 1979. <p>On Dec. 17:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Washington set a record high of 65, topping 64 from 1939 and 1984.• Washington set a record warm low of 54, topping 48 from 1984 and 2012.• Dulles set a record warm low of 53, topping 49 from 1984.• Baltimore set a record warm low of 52, topping 47 from 1984 and 2012.

	<p>On Dec. 19:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Washington set a record warm low of 50, topping 49 from 1984. <p>The prevailing December weather pattern featured a big chunk of cold air trapped in Western Canada as a warm zone of high pressure frequently resided over much of the Lower 48.</p> <p>It was unusually warm not only in Washington but also in much of the eastern two-thirds of the Lower 48. But that cold air that was locked over Canada is finally getting unleashed as we kick off January.</p> <p>Year-in-review</p> <p>2021, overall, was a warm year. It was the fifth-warmest year on record in Washington, with only 2020, 2019, 2017 and 2012, the warmest year, milder.</p> <p>How was our December forecast?</p> <p>At the end of November, we correctly called for a mild and drier-than-normal month; however, it was even milder and drier than we expected. We predicted temperatures to be one to three degrees above normal instead of the nearly six-degree departure. We called for December precipitation to be one-half to two inches drier than normal, whereas there was actually a deficit of almost three inches. Overall, we'd grade our outlook a B or B-minus.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/31 Seattle-area longest snowy period in 52yrs
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3292971/puget-sound-region-cold-snow-weather-post-christmas/
GIST	<p>The Puget Sound region's last gasp of snow this week fell Thursday night, with temperatures finally set to warm into the high 30s and low 40s by the weekend.</p> <p>According to the National Weather Service, Thursday marked the fifth straight day with measurable snow at Sea-Tac Airport, marking the longest such streak since 1969, and the seventh longest streak since records began in 1945.</p> <p>The great melt</p> <p>After a New Year's Eve in the upper teens, a "warm front" moves through on Saturday and a chance of rain starts Sunday.</p> <p>"As we get into Saturday, we'll start to noticeably warm through the day so it is going to be cool as we begin the weekend — Saturday morning still looks pretty chilly," Carly Kovacik, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service, told KIRO Radio. "But as we go through the day, Saturday will actually warm back up toward 40."</p> <p>As local meteorologist Michael Snyder pointed out to KIRO Radio's Charlie Harger earlier in the week, this run of frigid weather is far from ordinary.</p> <p>"It's pretty unusual — the last time we were in the mid-teens was 2010," Snyder noted.</p> <p>According to the National Weather Service, record low temperatures for Dec. 26 were set at Sea-Tac Airport, Quillayute, Bellingham, and Hoquiam. On Monday, temperatures in the Seattle area dipped down to 17 degrees Fahrenheit, marking the coldest day since November 2010.</p> <p>Seattle's high of 23 degrees Monday was the city's coldest day in 31 years, according to the National Weather Service.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/03 SKorea: North defector rare DMZ crossing
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/seoul-north-korea-defector-made-rare-border-crossing-82048522

SEOUL, South Korea -- A person who crossed the border from South Korea into North Korea on New Year's Day was likely a defector who had slipped through the same heavily fortified frontier in the other direction to settle in South Korea in late 2020, the military said Monday.

South Korean surveillance equipment detected an unidentified person moving into North Korean territory across the eastern portion of the border on Saturday. The military said a security camera showed a person earlier Saturday crawling over a barbed-wire fence along the southern edge of the border.

On Monday, the Defense Ministry said in a statement it suspects an earlier North Korean defector was the border crosser and that it is trying to confirm related information.

A ministry official said the statement refers to a former North Korean citizen who was captured south of the border in November 2020. The man identified himself as a former gymnast and told investigators that he had crawled over barbed wire fences to defect before being found by South Korean troops, the official said, requesting anonymity citing department rules.

The official said the appearance of the person detected by the South Korean security camera on Saturday matched the former defector.

The person's fate isn't known.

A South Korean thermal observation device detected four people in the northern part of the border after Saturday's border crossing, the Defense Ministry official said. This could suggest three North Korean soldiers came to take the border crosser away from the border.

South Korea asked North Korea to ensure the person's safety via a military hotline communication channel. North Korea replied that it received the South Korean messages but didn't elaborate on the border crosser, according to the South Korean Defense Ministry.

In September 2020, North Korea fatally shot a South Korean fisheries official found floating in its waters along a sea boundary. South Korea said North Korea troops were under orders to shoot anyone illegally crossing the border to protect against the coronavirus pandemic.

South Korean media reports said the former gymnast defector worked as a cleaner in South Korea and had economic difficulties. The Defense Ministry refused to confirm the reports but said an initial investigation showed he wasn't engaged in espionage or other suspicious activities in South Korea. The ministry didn't speculate on why he returned to the North.

About 34,000 North Koreans have fled to South Korea for economic and political reasons since the late 1990s, and only about 30 have returned home in the past 10 years, according to South Korean government records.

Observers say those returnees likely failed to adjust to their new highly competitive, capitalistic lives in South Korea, had big debts or were blackmailed by North Korean agents who threatened to harm their loved ones if they didn't return.

Defecting via the border is rare. Unlike its official name, the Demilitarized Zone, the 248-kilometer (155-mile) -long, 4-kilometer (2.5-mile) -wide border is guarded by land mines, tank traps and combat troops on both sides as well as barbed wire fences. A vast majority of the North Korean defectors in South Korea came via China and Southeast Asian countries.

Saturday's border crossing raised questions about South Korea's security posture because the person's entry into the DMZ was not noticed by South Korean troops for a few hours, though surveillance equipment detected the person. The military acknowledged it had sent soldiers but failed to locate the person before he or she crossed the border.

	In recent years, the South Korean military faced similar criticism when North Koreans passed through DMZ areas unnoticed to defect, including one who knocked on the door of a South Korean army barrack.
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HEADLINE	01/02 Canada baffling neurological illness
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/02/neurological-illness-affecting-young-adults-canada
GIST	<p>A whistleblower in the Canadian province of New Brunswick has warned that a progressive neurological illness that has baffled experts for more than two years appears to be affecting a growing number of young people and causing swift cognitive decline among some of the afflicted.</p> <p>Speaking to the Guardian, an employee with Vitalité Health Network, one of the province's two health authorities, said that suspected cases are growing in number and that young adults with no prior health triggers are developing a catalog of troubling symptoms, including rapid weight loss, insomnia, hallucinations, difficulty thinking and limited mobility.</p> <p>The official number of cases under investigation, 48, remains unchanged since it was first announced in early spring 2021. But multiple sources say the cluster could now be as many as 150 people, with a backlog of cases involving young people still requiring further assessment.</p> <p>"I'm truly concerned about these cases because they seem to evolve so fast," said the source. "I'm worried for them and we owe them some kind of explanation."</p> <p>At the same time, at least nine cases have been recorded in which two people in close contact – but without genetic links – have developed symptoms, suggesting that environmental factors may be involved.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One suspected case involved a man who was developing symptoms of dementia and ataxia. His wife, who was his caregiver, suddenly began losing sleep and experiencing muscle wasting, dementia and hallucinations. Now her condition is worse than his. • A woman in her 30s was described as non-verbal, is feeding with a tube and drools excessively. Her caregiver, a nursing student in her 20s, also recently started showing symptoms of neurological decline. • In another case, a young mother quickly lost nearly 60 pounds, developed insomnia and began hallucinating. Brain imaging showed advanced signs of atrophy. <p>The Vitalité employee, who asked not to be named because they were unauthorized to speak publicly and feared repercussions for speaking out, said they decided to come forward because of growing concerns over the speed with which young people have deteriorated.</p> <p>"This is not a New Brunswick disease," said the employee. "We're probably the area that is raising the flag because we're mostly rural and in an area where people might have more exposure to environmental factors."</p> <p>But in January, the province of New Brunswick is widely expected to announce that the cluster of cases, first made public last year after a memo was leaked to the media, is the result of misdiagnoses, which have mistakenly grouped unrelated illnesses together.</p> <p>The Special Neurodegenerative Disorder Clinic, also called the Mind Clinic, in the city of Moncton is the clearing house for cases referred from within the region as well as neighbouring provinces. Prospective cases have typically stumped doctors and resisted a battery of standardized neurological tests used to rule out certain conditions.</p> <p>Using a case description guideline developed by a team of neurologists and epidemiologists, the clinic decides if the patients warrant further investigation or if they may have a known illness or disease. Determining who becomes part of the cluster is subjective, largely because the brain is notoriously difficult to study. Certainty is often only obtained after the patient dies and the cerebral tissue can be fully tested.</p>

Despite the striking details surrounding the newer cases, the province has worked to tamp down fears. In October, [officials suggested that the eight fatal cases](#) were the result of misdiagnosis, arguing that instead of suffering from a shared neurological illness, the victims had died of known and unrelated pathologies.

But experts familiar with the cluster are alarmed, largely because of the age of the patients. Neurological illnesses are rare in young people.

“The fact that we have a younger spectrum of patients here argues very strongly against what appears to be the preferred position of the government of New Brunswick – that the cases in this cluster are being mistakenly lumped together,” said a scientist at the Canada’s public health agency, who specializes in neurodegenerative illnesses but was unauthorized to speak.

In October the province also said an epidemiological report suggested there was no significant evidence of any known food, behaviour or environmental exposure that could explain the illness.

Tim Beatty’s father Laurie, a retired hardware employee, died in 2019 after the onset of mental confusion around Christmas marked the beginning of his rapid deterioration.

Beatty says the family was “gobsmacked” when he learned his father was one of eight people a pathologist [controversially declared](#) was improperly diagnosed and had instead died of Alzheimer’s.

Beatty and his sister have pleaded to have their father’s remains tested for neurotoxins, including β -Methylamino-L-alanine (BMAA), which [some have suggested](#) could be the culprit behind the illness.

[In one study](#), high concentrations of BMAA were found in lobster, an industry that drives the economies of many of New Brunswick’s coastal communities. The province’s apparent resistance to testing for suspected environmental factors has led to speculation among families that the efforts to rule out the existence of a cluster could be motivated by political decision making.

“If a group of people wanted to breed conspiracy theorists, then our government has done a wonderful job at promoting it,” said Beatty. “Are they just trying to create a narrative for the public that they hope we’ll absorb and walk away from? I just don’t understand it.”

Documents obtained through freedom of information requests and seen by the Guardian showed scientists at the country’s public health agency were considering BMAA as a possible cause, but needed the province to order the testing.

“I don’t know why the province wouldn’t just simply do the science and look. They have my dad’s remains. We’ve given them full permission to do toxicology and do what needs to be done,” said Beatty. “Yet, nothing has been looked at.”

But experts nonetheless warn that testing itself is also more difficult than the public realizes.

While some medical tests can provide quick and definite results other types of investigation require far more work.

“What people are talking about really amounts to a full research investigation, because then we know what we’re looking for precisely,” said the federal scientist who was familiar with both the cluster and the testing process. “Right now we don’t have a way to interpret simple data that you might get when testing a person’s brain tissue for a particular toxin. For example, how much are ‘elevated’ levels of a neurotoxin compared to the rest of the public? And when does that become a cause for concern?”

The scientist said teams are ready to begin the research, but “New Brunswick has specifically told us not to go forward with that work”.

	<p>Those familiar with the cluster are bracing for a January report, written by the province's oversight committee, which will determine if the 48 cases are genuinely suffering from a neurological illness or the result of misdiagnosis by neurologists.</p> <p>Amid mounting tension between specialists and the provincial government, a source familiar with the Mind Clinic say the postings for several jobs at the clinic – a social worker, an administrator and a neuropsychologist – were recently made temporary, the budget would no longer be recurrent and the clinic would be converted into a Alzheimer's and geriatric clinic. Health minister Dorothy Shephard told reporters on 1 December that speculation the clinic would be shut down was untrue.</p> <p>"We keep telling the patients that the country is behind them, and that the tests will be done so that we can figure this out. We tell them we will get to the bottom of this so that we can help them," said the Vitalité employee. "And so far, that hasn't happened. But they need us."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/01 Puzzle: 2021 was deadliest on roads in 15yrs
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/2021-was-the-deadliest-on-washington-roads-in-15-years-puzzling-experts/
GIST	<p>As Washington went quiet in the early days of the pandemic, Staci Hoff figured at least it would mean fewer deaths on the roads in 2020. She was wrong.</p> <p>Then, as cars began returning in 2021, she hoped maybe the carnage would slow as congestion increased and speeds decreased. She was wrong again.</p> <p>Washington ended 2021 with more fatal and serious car crashes than it's seen in 15 years. On the heels of an especially deadly 2020, the continued rise is a frustrating and increasingly confounding trend that's playing out nationwide. Experts can't point to a single reason.</p> <p>"We have talked 2020 to death, but it is the end of 2021 and this was way worse," said Hoff, research director for the Washington Traffic Safety Commission. "The increases that we're seeing in very serious crashes are not subsiding."</p> <p>Washington for the year saw 540 fatal crashes, which killed more than 600 people, according to data from the Washington State Department of Transportation. Not since 2006 have the numbers been that high. In 118 of the year's fatal crashes, a bicyclist or pedestrian was killed.</p> <p>An additional 2,411 crashes in 2021 resulted in likely serious injury — also the most since 2006 and 16% more than in 2020.</p> <p>Alcohol- and drug-influenced serious and fatal crashes remained high in 2021, sustaining a harrowing 25% jump from 2019 to 2020. Speed, too, continued to play an outsized role after climbing nearly 18% in 2020.</p> <p>In Seattle, 31 people were killed in car crashes in 2021, according to preliminary data from the Seattle Department of Transportation. That, too, is the most since 2006. Jim Curtain, project development director at SDOT, said 19 of those deaths were pedestrians, and nearly half involved hit-and-runs. The city has also seen a jump in impaired driving, Curtain said.</p> <p>"It's absolutely discouraging," said John Milton, director of transportation safety and systems analysis for WSDOT. "It's our job is to reduce fatal and serious crashes. I think of this as, 'what if that was my family member out there?'"</p> <p>Counterintuitively, total crashes were lower in both 2020 and 2021 than they'd been in at least the previous 15 years, a sign that the proportion of crashes leading to catastrophic outcomes is through the roof.</p>

For Hoff and other researchers, there's no single explanation for why this year was worse than last, except that the conditions laid out in 2020 have not receded.

"Nothing is shifting dramatically" from last year, said Hoff. "We had a small uptick in impairment, we had a small uptick in speeding in terms of a factor. More of it is happening, but not one thing is driving it."

Early in the pandemic, anecdotal reports from state troopers and road workers suggested behavior behind the wheel had become more extreme — a hunch borne out in the rise of speed-related crashes and so-called "aggressive drivers." As the roads emptied, drivers could more easily hit triple digits on their speedometers.

Combined with a rise in alcohol and drug use, collisions that may have been moderate in 2019 became serious or deadly in 2020.

As traffic returns, 2021's picture is less obvious. Speed and distraction are almost certainly at the trend's core, said Mark Hallenbeck, director of the Washington State Transportation Center at the University of Washington. But there's another, more nebulous cause that's even more difficult to track.

"We have a pissed-off society," he said. "When you are in your big metal box of a car, you have an awful lot of ability to act out your frustrations both with accelerator and brake."

Not just a statistic

It took years for Paul Ossorio to accept that he couldn't have prevented his brother's death. That's what's so different about losing someone to a car crash, he said.

"You feel the guilt, not that you killed them, but like you let their life slip through your fingers," he said.

It was more than 30 years ago that a drunken driver hit his brother, Todd, 20, who was riding his bicycle to the store to buy a Frank Sinatra CD set and biography for their mother's birthday. Now, decades later, a jump in traffic deaths is more than a statistic to Ossorio.

"Each number represents, obviously, that somebody died, but it also represents countless people who are affected," he said. "And that's really the number."

Washington's 6% rise in serious and fatal crashes from 2019 to 2020 was close to average for the country that year, which saw a national 7% spike, according to the National Safety Council.

Maine, Arkansas and Washington, D.C., experienced the sharpest jumps, each over 30%. Rhode Island saw a 24% increase.

The council hasn't come out with its final tallies for 2021 yet, but preliminary data released in September showed a 16% increase for the first six months of the year. Washington's rise was around 1% — a smaller but nonetheless notable increase.

"The alarming trend in Washington state really highlights the fact that we need to think about how we ensure that if someone does make a mistake that it's survivable," said Dongho Chang, WSDOT's state traffic engineer.

Hallenbeck of the UW said decades of design decisions have led to this moment. Straight and wide roads, combined with quieter and larger cars, remove sensory clues for drivers, making it easier to speed. The pandemic emphasized the most dangerous parts of those decisions.

"All of our senses tell us to drive quickly unless there's a bunch of traffic in front of us," he said. "When we removed it for the pandemic, everybody drove fast. They drove fast, partly because they had no clue how fast they were driving, and partly because they could. So with speeds up, lots of bad things happen."

At the same time, the cause of the rise in 2021 is proving more complicated to pinpoint than 2020. Traffic levels are nearly back to 2019 levels and the Washington State Patrol had fewer contacts with “aggressive drivers.”

But the stressors of 2020 — isolation, uncertainty, fear — remain. And with them comes an environment still conducive to high speeds, said Hoff, so that “instead of something that may have resulted in an injury in 2019 or 2020, it is a fatality in 2021.”

Preventing crashes

Since the start of the pandemic, police have cut speed-related traffic stops by a third, according to data from the Washington State Patrol. Sgt. Darren Wright said coronavirus precautions are still being taken, which means officers are less proactive.

“They were assessing and trying to figure out how to keep their officers safe,” said Shelly Baldwin, director of the Washington Traffic Safety Commission. “And people kind of knew that maybe they weren’t going to get caught doing the kinds of things that they would have gotten caught doing.”

For some safe-street advocates, however, enforcement should come second to design, especially at a time when police involvement in traffic stops is receiving new scrutiny.

“Preventative measures are better than punitive ones,” said Laura Goodfellow, an advocate for safer streets. “I’d rather have a road where it feels hard and unnatural to speed. It doesn’t really help anyone to be getting tickets.”

Milton of WSDOT said the state is constantly looking for the weak points in the system. He pointed to busy streets with stoplights that drivers ignore, such as Aurora Avenue and Lake City Way, both of which were some of Seattle’s deadliest streets, as they’ve been in the past. The state is working to install more roundabouts, which can cut down on deadly crashes through intersections.

In Seattle, Councilmember Andrew Lewis pushed through a small increase in the city’s commercial parking tax to fund safety measures in the city.

“It’s not a sufficient amount of money to solve the problem; it is a sufficient amount of money to make a difference,” he said.

Seattle has also recently installed new traffic-enforcement cameras, added more bike lanes downtown and redesigned some dangerous streets like Rainier Avenue. Curtin of SDOT said the city will soon partner with WSDOT to make improvements to Aurora Avenue by adding more signaled crosswalks and building out sidewalks on both sides of the street. He also said the city is looking toward receiving money from the \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill signed into law by President Joe Biden in November, about \$5 billion of which is earmarked for safety grants.

But looking to the future, it’s hard to say with any confidence that the trend will quickly reverse.

“If there were easy solutions, trust me, the engineering community would have done it,” said Hallenbeck. “But there aren’t. There aren’t easy solutions because we can’t engineer our way out of human behavior.”

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HEADLINE	12/29 Most unusual job market in modern history
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/12/29/job-market-2021/
GIST	It can be difficult now to remember what the U.S. economy looked like a year ago. The unemployment rate was 6.7 percent, with 10 million fewer people employed than before the pandemic. Expectations were that it could take years for the labor market to heal.

Then, the economy experienced two historic surprises. First, demand for workers came soaring back at a velocity almost never before seen. And second, despite companies going all out to hire, millions of workers either retired early or stayed on the sidelines.

These two forces collided to create the most unusual job market in living memory — and an economy afflicted not by too few jobs, but too few workers.

Demand for workers has recovered, but the number of willing workers has not

For those looking for employment or to change jobs, the 2021 economy has been a blessing, as companies hike wages and many workers feel empowered to quit because they can swiftly find new opportunities. But the resulting labor shortages are causing profound problems across a range of industries — from restaurants that can't find servers to factories that can't find people for the assembly line to [hospitals that can't find nurses](#).

The shortages are beginning to raise difficult questions about how much some of America's most vital sectors can continue to rely on a relatively low-paid workforce.

In 2022, something's got to give. Otherwise, worker shortages could become an enduring feature — or defect — of the U.S. economy.

How did the labor market get here?

The economy has seldom seen such a mismatch between so much demand for workers and so few people willing to work.

The immediate economic hit from the [coronavirus](#) pandemic was unfathomable. In April 2020 alone, nearly 21 million jobs were lost. Despite improvements throughout last year, most economists thought that progress would come slowly in 2021, as anxious, badly burned businesses reluctantly hired.

Instead, it has been a nearly unprecedented recovery.

The unemployment rate, which stood at 4.2 percent in November, has recovered more rapidly than at all but one point since World War II, the [relatively mild](#) recession of 1960.

“2021 was a surprise, I think, to all economists,” said Daniel Zhao, a senior economist at the employment website Glassdoor. “At the beginning of the year, we were concerned about whether we would get a strong enough recovery to get anywhere close to the labor market before the pandemic. And in some ways, we've passed that.”

But the desire to hire is only half the story. The problem has been on the other side of the ledger — the number of Americans who are working or looking for work, also known as the labor force.

During the heavy layoffs of 2020, vast numbers of Americans left the labor force, a common pattern during an economic downturn. But usually, as the economy bounces back, people start looking for jobs again.

This time, it hasn't really happened. Since summer 2020, the labor force participation rate — the share of the population looking for jobs or employed — has hardly budged.

In total, there are still about 3.5 million fewer people employed than there were two years ago. But government statistics show that just over half that number of people — 1.8 million — have joined the ranks of Americans seeking a job.

Why was there such a strong recovery?

The U.S. economic recovery from the covid pandemic was the [strongest](#) of any of the big Western economies. That is in large part thanks to the multiple rounds of government stimulus that totaled at least [\\$5.2 trillion](#).

Many of these measures poured money directly into Americans' bank accounts.

Now largely forgotten \$600 stimulus checks [hit](#) bank accounts as Americans welcomed the new year. And just as that boost began to run out, the \$1,400 checks from President Biden's \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan began to arrive, according to data from the JPMorgan Chase Institute. That was on top of a variety of other stimulus measures, including an expanded child tax credit for families and the extension of enhanced unemployment benefits.

The Biden stimulus pushed the bank accounts of even the lowest-income Americans to unexpected heights. On average, they had more than twice as much in their savings accounts as they did when the pandemic began.

The Federal Reserve, the U.S. central bank that controls interest rates, helped, too. It held rates near zero and [pumped hundreds of billions of dollars into the](#) economy.

The twin fire hoses of cash — one from Congress, one from the Fed — sent Americans' spending roaring back.

The vast majority of that spending went to purchasing goods, from cleaning supplies and home appliances to hamburgers and milk. The service industry, such as hotels and restaurants, saw only a modest boost in spending.

But the spending surge put pressure on the entire labor market. Manufacturers, food processors and all the infrastructure that is involved in delivering goods to stores and people's homes, such as warehouses and truckers, suddenly had huge demand for workers. Service-sector companies, meanwhile, saw fierce new competition for labor.

Why didn't more people want jobs?

Each month since May 2020, a special survey created by the Census Bureau, the Household Pulse Survey, has asked why people aren't looking for work.

Initially, the answer wasn't surprising. A large plurality of people cited layoffs and furloughs due to the pandemic. But as hiring recovered, other powerful forces emerged.

An unexpected surge in retirements, along with the continued threat of the coronavirus — which [killed more](#) Americans in 2021 than it did in 2020 — kept people from working.

"I think many economists and forecasters in 2021 continually predicted that, this month, people would suddenly explode back into the labor force, whether it's because of vaccines, or the summer, or schools reopening," Glassdoor's Zhao said. "That just fundamentally has not happened."

Retirements explain a large chunk of the missing workers. For some, soaring retirement accounts and home values, combined with the lower expenses of a simplified work-from-home lifestyle, [made it financially feasible](#) to retire early. [Others](#) retired solely on Social Security, without retirement accounts to ease the way.

A Washington Post analysis found that [over 1.5 million more people were retired in November 2021](#) than would have been expected based on pre-pandemic trends. Employment has actually declined in the last year among workers who were 55 or older at the start of the pandemic.

Younger workers — those ages 16 to 24 at the start of the pandemic — have bolstered the ranks of willing workers. But that still isn't enough to balance out the number of older workers who have left.

Retirement isn't the only force in the worker shortage. The Pulse survey points to other reasons — child care, a simple desire not to work — but the most powerful after retirement is also the most mysterious: “other.”

Nobody knows what “other” refers to, or how long it might endure. Some economists argue that the government benefits that helped fuel consumer spending also enabled more Americans to be pickier about when to return to work. Now that those benefits have ended, more Americans may seek out work.

But it will be hard to catch up. The pool of potential workers has shrunk so much that getting back to the number of people employed before the pandemic would require unprecedented success in connecting job seekers and employers.

Assuming more people don't start looking for work, it would require an unemployment rate of 2 percent, lower than at any point since measurement began in 1948.

What has been the impact on workers?

The exodus of older workers, combined with the spiking demand for labor, has created a superlative market for job seekers. Those who do want to work have almost unprecedented opportunity, particularly in service industries that lost huge numbers of jobs at the start of the pandemic and are still trying to rebuild their workforce.

Workers are quitting their jobs at historically high rates in a phenomenon known as the Great Resignation — higher than any seen since December 2000, when the federal government began tracking quits. But most of those who quit already appear to have another job lined up.

This worker power has translated into the highest wage gains workers in nonmanagement positions have seen in [almost four decades](#).

While many companies are passing those gains on to consumers in the form of higher prices, earnings growth for most workers has outpaced inflation over the past two years, according to a [recent analysis](#) by University of Massachusetts at Amherst economist Arindrajit Dube.

Across the economy, lower pay has tended to mean higher wage growth. Nonmanagerial workers in gas stations, the lowest-paid subsector, saw earnings rise 15.9 percent (to \$14.58) since the pandemic began. That's far above the 10.2 percent increase seen by the average nonmanagerial worker over that time.

“The whole pandemic has really affected — especially — employees that were stuck in low-wage sectors: restaurants, the hospitality industry,” said Bernard Baumohl, chief global economist at the Economic Outlook Group. “This group is no longer willing to tolerate those kinds of wages and those conditions that they experienced prior to the pandemic and during the pandemic, and they also realize they have a lot more leverage now and are moving out of those low-paying jobs with long hours.”

The long-term effects of this upheaval on the workforce are yet to be seen.

Despite their newfound power in the job market, most workers who left low-paying jobs in restaurants and hotels ended up back in the same industry, according to a recent report from the California Policy Lab. Many of those who didn't ended up in other low-paying industries, such as retail.

“The fact that workers from the hardest hit sectors in the pandemic typically find jobs in those same sectors may be hindering the path to recovery, especially for low-wage workers,” the report's authors write.

What has been the impact on the economy?

What has been a boon for workers has become a crisis for a growing number of industries that are facing severe shortages.

Job openings in industries such as restaurants, hotels and retail are at or near record highs. And some sectors, particularly retail and health care, have [barely been able to hire enough people](#) to balance out the number of workers leaving their jobs.

The struggle to hire and retain workers in the food and hospitality sector has dominated headlines since the summer. But in the background, a quieter struggle to staff nursing homes, day cares, schools and other industries has worn away at the foundations of America's social infrastructure.

The worker shortage is starkest in [nursing homes and residential-care facilities](#), the only industry where employment has declined significantly since May 2020. Lower staffing can mean less attention given to residents and fewer open beds, leaving some patients to languish in hospitals that are already squeezed for space during the pandemic.

Similar challenges have afflicted [child-care centers](#), which have hemorrhaged workers and often can't afford to increase wages as much as competing employers. Short-staffing in these centers and in public schools has the potential to ripple out through the economy as disruptions to child care cause parents to miss work or drop out of the labor force.

It's not clear who will fill these workforce holes. The pandemic exacerbated a demographic crunch long in the making. The population is growing more slowly than the economy, and productivity — how much workers can accomplish in any given time period, thanks to technology — isn't increasing fast enough to make up the difference.

Earlier this month, the [Census Bureau estimated](#) 0.1 percent population growth in the United States in 2021, the slowest rate on record. Other recently released census data [indicated](#) that immigration, long a top source of new workers, plunged to its lowest level in decades in 2021.

"If the labor force participation rate doesn't move and immigration doesn't recover, then we can't continue to grow at the pace we otherwise would," said Marianne Wanamaker, an economics professor at the University of Tennessee and a top economist in the White House during the Trump administration. "We can't automate fast enough to keep us on track."

For now, Americans will have to learn to live with too few workers in key aspects of their lives.

If 2021 was a stark reminder of how much the economy depends on low-wage labor, 2022 will be a test of how — and whether — employers and workers can find a new and better balance.

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HEADLINE	12/31 Western Washington year of extreme weather
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/weather/the-seattle-areas-5-most-extreme-weather-events-of-2021/
GIST	<p>Heat waves, rivers of rain from the tropics and now a record-breaking snap of bitter cold.</p> <p>Western Washington's weather has been full of extremes this past year, and much of it unfolded the way climate scientists have been predicting for decades. For three local meteorologists asked to weigh in on the year's most significant weather, the record-setting year was not unexpected.</p> <p>"I don't think it takes a rocket scientist to see where this is going," said Justin Shaw, who writes the Seattle Weather Blog.</p> <p>Joe Boomgard-Zagrodnik, a former Washington State University meteorologist who now works in the private sector, said the year epitomized the predictions of climate scientists.</p> <p>Here are the weather events Shaw, Boomgard-Zagrodnik and Logan Johnson, meteorologist in charge at the National Weather Service in Seattle, listed as the most extreme this year:</p> <p>Significant wind and rainstorm in January</p>

The first of the extreme weather events Johnson listed occurred in January. A period of significant storminess and consecutive atmospheric river events brought flooding to dozens of rivers. Many landslides were observed as well.

On Jan. 12 and 13, winds gusted from 50 to 70 mph across the lowlands and upward of 80 mph in the mountains. This included gusts of 58 mph at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, 64 mph on Whidbey Island, 56 mph in Tacoma, 48 mph in Everett and 49 mph in Bellingham.

These winds toppled trees and brought power outages, with more than 500,000 customers out of power around the Puget Sound region during the peak of the event.

Heavy snow in February

While there were a few small snow events around the Seattle area during the winter of 2020-21, Johnson said the most significant came Feb. 12-14.

About 6 to 12 inches of snow fell from the Everett area south into Oregon, with Portland receiving 9 inches of snow.

In some areas, Johnson said, this was followed by a significant amount of freezing rain.

At Sea-Tac, 8.9 inches of snow were recorded on Feb. 13, making it the snowiest single day recorded in the month of February at the airport, and the snowiest single day at Sea-Tac since Dec. 31 of 1968.

Record-breaking June heat

Shaw, Boomgard-Zagrodnik and Johnson all said that the heat wave in late June — [when Seattle hit a record-shattering 108](#) — was astonishing.

“That was an event beyond the scope of anything we’d ever experienced before and it rewrote the narrative of what is even possible in the Pacific Northwest,” said Boomgard-Zagrodnik. “It was incredible.”

The unprecedented heat wave brought record high temperatures to several states and portions of Canada.

June 24-28 brought five consecutive days at or above 90 degrees in Seattle, including three straight days at 100 degrees or hotter. Seattle recorded its all-time hottest temperature on June 28, with a high of 108 degrees.

Olympia reached 110 degrees that day, while Everett hit 100 and Tacoma 105.

Numerous fires were reported across the area along with infrastructure impacts from buckling roadways and railways, and hundreds of people died across the region, Johnson said.

Looking back, it seems that 2017 was “the year when the switch got flipped,” said Shaw. Out of the last five years, all but 2019 brought record-breaking heat, [unprecedented wildfires in the northwest and smoke in Seattle](#), he said.

Wettest fall on record

Also incredible, all three meteorologists said, was our rainy fall with [bomb cyclones](#), one [atmospheric river](#) after the next, and the wettest [meteorological fall in Seattle’s recorded history](#).

While fall is typically a soggy time of year, the fall of 2021 was especially so.

Narrow plumes of moisture originating over the Pacific tropics, known as atmospheric rivers, brought torrential rain that forced evacuations, brought [power outages, landslides and severe flooding](#), and prompted Gov. Jay Inslee to declare a severe weather emergency.

Over 19 inches of rain were recorded at SeaTac between Sept. 1 and Nov. 30, compared with 11.81 inches in a normal fall, Johnson said.

Bellingham saw its wettest fall on record, with 23.55 inches of rain (breaking the previous record from 1990 by over 6 inches). Over 67 inches of rain were measured at a weather observation site on the coast near Forks this fall.

November-December atmospheric rivers

As part of the wettest fall on record, November was itself a record-breaking month in many areas.

November is typically the wettest month of the year for Seattle, so that made this year's total of 10.26 inches that month at Sea-Tac even more noteworthy. A series of atmospheric river events throughout the latter portion of the month brought heavy rainfall and very high snow levels (meaning snow was accumulating only at high elevations) across Western Washington, Johnson said.

Two straight weeks of rain beginning on Nov. 18 left many regional mountains bare through early December and contributed to widespread mudslides and flooding.

Significant flooding was recorded at the Skagit and Nooksack rivers in Whatcom County and adjacent portions of British Columbia, which sent hundreds of residents from their homes in communities along the rivers' edge, including Everson and Sumas.

Mount Vernon saw near-record flooding, with some of the highest river levels on the Skagit since the 1990s. Flooding and landslides produced significant impacts on area roadways, shutting portions of Interstate 5 south of Bellingham as well as many roads on the Olympic Peninsula.

"They said summers would be warmer and drier and winters would be wetter, and that's exactly what's happened," Boomgard-Zagrodnik said.

End of December's cold snap

An arctic blast the last week of December brought some of the coldest daily temperatures on record to the Puget Sound region as well as [more snow than usual](#). The winter weather blanketed roads in snow and led to holiday travel disruptions and power outages.

On Dec. 26, the low at Sea-Tac was recorded at 20 degrees, beating the previous low temperature record of 22 degrees for that date, set 73 years ago in 1948.

Dec. 27 marked a second day of record-breaking lows. The low temperature at Sea-Tac was recorded at 17 degrees, beating by three degrees the 1968 record of 20 degrees for the date.

Though a daily record was not set on Dec. 28, temperatures remained below freezing, marking the longest stretch of subfreezing weather since 1998, Shaw said.

By Dec. 29, some parts of the Puget Sound region had already topped their average snowfall totals for the month. In Seattle, 3.9 inches of snow had been recorded, more than two times the city's normal December tally.

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HEADLINE	12/30 VMI waterboarding; tormentors in military
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/12/30/vmi-waterboarding-hazing-rat-line/
GIST	<p>The former Virginia Military Institute cadet was scrolling Facebook when he saw a trio of photos that made him seethe.</p> <p>The images showed a graduating VMI student being sworn in as a Marine officer on a December day in 2019 at the school's historic Memorial Hall.</p>

The former cadet knew the freshly commissioned Marine second lieutenant in a way he'd never forget. Just across the street from Memorial Hall, that same student had helped waterboard him and another VMI freshman inside the barracks as part of an unauthorized initiation ritual, according to two lawsuits, a VMI police report and the transcript of a VMI disciplinary hearing.

One VMI official testified that the January 2018 incident, though brief, was one of the worst episodes of abuse against a freshman he could remember at the nation's oldest state-supported military college, where hazing is prohibited by state law and [VMI policy](#).

The room had been darkened, the feet of the two freshmen were bound with duct tape, and an Islamic call to prayer was played on a speaker to invoke [the Abu Ghraib prison torture scandal](#), the police report and the VMI disciplinary hearing transcript show.

Waterboarding is designed to simulate the feeling of being drowned and became the subject of [heated debate](#) when the CIA used it to interrogate al-Qaeda detainees after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Why, the former cadet wondered, did VMI suspend his tormentor and two other upperclassmen instead of expelling them, allowing them to return to school and graduate? And why was the military commissioning any of them as officers, including two cadets who were in the room and did nothing to stop it?

The Facebook photos made the former cadet so irate that he decided to sue.

He filed a federal lawsuit under the name "John Doe" against the college, its senior administrators and five of the cadets in the room. When his case was dismissed in 2020, he immediately filed another suit against the five students in state court, seeking nearly \$1 million in damages and legal fees.

"VMI was the life I was trying to build, and those students took it away from me," he said. "I was shocked that the upperclassmen in that room that night were allowed to commission. Who would let them in? This was a war crime — but for fun."

But Will Woodrow, the defense attorney for one of the suspended students, said the term waterboarding unfairly exaggerates what happened.

"Their heads weren't held in place, and water wasn't constantly being poured down their mouths, so they felt like they were drowning," Woodrow said. "This was a few ounces of water. They could have sat up and said, 'Stop.' Waterboarding is a very loaded word. We learned about it because of what the CIA did. But that's not what these cadets were doing."

VMI officials were not in doubt about what happened.

"It was pretty clear to me," Bill Wanovich, the school's then-commandant, testified at a disciplinary hearing, "that both of [the freshmen] had been waterboarded at least once."

A rat mission

For more than a year, the hazing lawsuits have been overshadowed by the state-ordered investigation into [racism](#) and [sexism](#) at VMI.

The 182-year-old college, which received \$21.6 million in state funding for the 2021-2022 academic year, educates about 1,650 students on its Lexington campus.

But with the [independent investigation](#) complete and a series of reforms underway, the lawsuit against the five VMI graduates in Roanoke County Circuit Court highlights another controversial component of the college's culture: its century-plus-old "rat line."

At VMI, new students, known as "rats," are subjected to a roughly six-month initiation process, enduring grueling boot-camp-style workouts and verbal abuse from upperclassmen.

But VMI warns its cadets, coaches and teachers that the school does not tolerate hazing, which can pose a threat to student safety. “Any individual or organization found to be in violation of this policy shall be subject to disciplinary action, which may include a sanction up to and including dismissal for cadets and termination of employment for faculty, administrators, coaches, and staff,” VMI’s [policy states](#).

The school routinely [expels students](#) who violate its one-strike-and-you’re-out honor code, barring cadets from lying, cheating, stealing or tolerating those who do.

In a statement to The Washington Post, a VMI spokesman declined to explain why the students involved in the waterboarding incident were not expelled, saying federal law prohibits the school from discussing specific cadet disciplinary cases.

“Hazing has been and continues to be a dismissible offense and a crime,” the college said. “Reports of incidents that could constitute hazing are always reported to the Commonwealth’s Attorney and investigated by law enforcement. If a cadet is found guilty by a court of law, they will be permanently dismissed from the Institute. ... If the matter does not rise to a criminal charge but is considered conduct unbecoming of a cadet, the matter will be adjudicated by the commandant and/or the superintendent, up to, and including, expulsion from VMI.”

The waterboarding incident occurred during a “rat mission,” an unsanctioned task, ranging from the silly to the extreme, that freshmen complete at an upperclassman’s order.

The Post is identifying the former cadet who filed the lawsuits by his middle name, Robert, because his anonymity as a plaintiff has so far not been denied in court.

The Post is also not identifying the defendants because, though the police investigated the incident, they were not charged with crimes, and Robert, now 23, did not press charges himself. The Post is, however, naming the other freshman who was targeted, Jacob Salomonsky.

Shortly before he graduated in 2021, Salomonsky filed a motion in Robert’s lawsuit seeking a court order for Robert to stop calling him “John Doe 2” and asserting that he does not need anonymity. Salomonsky — who did not respond to interview requests from The Post — also wanted Robert to remove any claims suggesting the defendants committed legal wrongdoing against him.

He said “the events of that evening consisted of good-natured roughhousing and some silly charades delivered with a playful spirit.” His and Robert’s identities are well known in the VMI community, he said, so being cast as a victim harmed his “personal and professional” interests and associated him with “an unfounded attack on what will be my alma mater — VMI.”

A suicide attempt

For years, universities and military academies — from [the Air Force Academy in Colorado](#) to [The Citadel in South Carolina](#) — have grappled with hazing incidents that have resulted in serious injuries or even death. In September, multiple students at Virginia Commonwealth University were charged with hazing after a freshman died of alcohol poisoning at a fraternity party.

VMI’s history of hazing goes back decades. Its most distinguished alumnus, Gen. George Marshall — whose statue stands outside the barracks — is perhaps the college’s most renowned hazing victim. The future statesman, who graduated from VMI in 1901, [was forced as a rat](#) to squat over an upturned bayonet, but slipped and tore his buttock, “narrowly missing serious injury,” according to the George C. Marshall Foundation.

A century later, in 1997, [six VMI freshmen were beaten](#) with a belt — and once with a coat hanger — on their legs and buttocks by seniors about three times a week for one month. More recently, in 2005, photos of at least one VMI cadet bound in duct tape leaked to [a Richmond online news site](#) in a ritual called [“balling up.”](#)

In his now-dismissed federal lawsuit, Robert listed multiple hazing incidents against freshmen that transpired during his freshman year or shortly before he arrived in August 2017: a cadet tied to a chair and beaten with socks full of bars of soap; a student ordered to defecate in another cadet's container of protein supplement; cadets directed to work out in an upperclassman's barracks room while chewing tobacco or with a mouth full of water.

Virginia's attorney general, which represented VMI and its administrators in the federal lawsuit, said in court documents those anecdotes "amount to rumors" because Robert did not say when or where they may have occurred or if the college knew about them.

But one cadet testified during a disciplinary hearing related to the waterboarding case that his upper-class mentor had burned his chest with a cigar.

In interviews with The Post, several current and former VMI students said the rat line can create the conditions that lead to hazing or other forms of mistreatment.

In 2018, seven months after the waterboarding incident, a Black freshman named Rafael Jenkins was threatened with a lynching by a White sophomore during what's known as Hell Week. The sophomore was suspended and left VMI.

According to the state-ordered investigation into VMI, five of 12 Black cadets surveyed found the rat line promotes "racial intolerance and/or discrimination" either "a little" or "a lot."

But the investigation did not recommend any changes to the rat line or most of VMI's other traditions, beyond urging the school to "examine how it can create an environment that does not disadvantage or impose disparate effects on minorities." The two freshmen in the waterboarding case are White.

In its Blue Book of cadet regulations, VMI prohibits treating rats cruelly, including striking them "with or without an implement," requiring them to binge eat or drink, or targeting them with "unduly harsh" or "abusive" language. Its [cadet handbook](#) issues another edict: "Rats cannot choose to be hazed." Both manuals outline how hazing is illegal in Virginia.

VMI said in its statement to The Post that it "has protocols in place to quickly identify and resolve any alleged act of hazing. Cadets who are in leadership positions are given clear rules of engagement and provided with training on what constitutes hazing." Freshmen are also educated "on what is appropriate and not appropriate conduct within the confines of the rat line."

At a school where students and alumni often refer to one another as "brother rats," VMI has always taken pride in [the rat line's adversity](#).

Though VMI doesn't require any of its students to commission in the military, every freshman must endure the rat line. The college bills it as the "great equalizer" because "all rats equally have to earn the respect" of the student body through their "effort, grit, and determination" regardless of their backgrounds.

Older, handpicked cadets — known as cadre members — frequently shout commands at rats in the barracks, telling them to drop and do push-ups if their rooms are messy, if their uniforms aren't worn properly, or if they laugh or act disrespectfully. The freshmen are often ordered to "strain" — tuck their chins into their chest and bend their backs backward, sometimes so severely that their bodies can shake.

"Bracing," a similar kind of stance, is still a requirement at VMI's rival, The Citadel, but the Naval Academy and West Point have phased out those painful postures, according to the schools' spokespeople.

Cadets told The Post that some harsh aspects of VMI's rat line may not generate headlines like beatings or waterboarding. But they question the purpose of straining or being forced to stand on their toes in their stiff military shoes during formations.

Straining “hurts your back,” said one freshman, who spoke anonymously for fear of reprisal. “They’ll just say, ‘Push your forehead back’ over and over. You bend so far back, and they make you hold it. It’s extremely painful.”

In August, VMI allowed Business Insider to [film Hell Week](#), the first days rats spend on campus. The video, published in November, shows freshmen being screamed at, forced to strain or do workouts while chanting the school’s honor code.

But VMI police records show only three investigations into hazing in the past five years, including the waterboarding case. And according to the college’s statistics, the number of incidents in which cadre members failed to meet VMI’s “standards of conduct” during Hell Week has been dropping, from 148 in 2019 to 84 in 2020 to 75 in 2021.

The college’s 2020 Hell Week report recounts one upper-class student warning a rat, “I’ll make this so bad for you that ... you won’t want to wake up in the morning” and threatening to kick another rat down the stairs. Other older cadets lunged at rats, calling them “retard” or “pussy” and spewing expletives, according to the report.

A classification of Hell Week incidents includes a “Rat Emotional Breakdowns” category. In one report, there were 18 recorded in 2019, five in 2020 and zero in 2021.

In 2020, one 18-year-old endured relentless verbal abuse from cadre members, the Hell Week report from that year shows. In an interview with The Post, he said the rat line left him so alienated and depressed that he tried to hang himself twice in one night with his VMI-issued belt in a barracks shower. After he told his roommates about his suicide attempts, he was escorted to the campus hospital and soon left VMI.

The former cadet, who wanted to join the Navy as a nuclear engineer, said the rat line operates under “the guise of tradition to facilitate the perpetual cycle of revenge and abuse.”

Asked about the suicide attempt, VMI said it has “trained counselors and medical professionals on staff 24-hours per day to help any cadet struggling with anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, and other mental health issues.”

This year, a rat had to seek medical treatment for panic attacks and suicidal thoughts before withdrawing from the school, said one VMI student, who knew the cadet.

“The rat was planning to commission, but found the rat line — and all the yelling — overwhelming and all too much,” said the cadet, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation.

Resurrection Week

For a long time, Robert downplayed his experience being waterboarded. After all, it had lasted just seconds.

“I thought it was normal,” he said. “This was just part of the rat line.”

It was around 1 a.m. on Jan. 31, 2018, when Robert entered an upperclassmen’s barracks room to help another freshman, Jacob Salomonsky, with a rat mission. The night’s objective: retrieve Salomonsky’s mattress, which had been stolen at the direction of an upperclassman.

It was “Resurrection Week.” The freshman class was days away from [“Breakout,”](#) a day-long event filled with intense physical workouts and [a march carrying logs](#).

Once they broke out, they would no longer be rats. They’d finally earn their status as “fourth-class” cadets.

But inside the upperclassmen's darkened room, Robert could barely see anything or make out where Salomonsky was.

Suddenly, a junior put Robert in a headlock, according to the VMI police report. Then, someone fastened a mattress strap around his upper body, pinning his arms to his side, the report said. His feet were duct-taped together, and he was pushed under a bed frame.

"It's time for some Abu Ghraib shit," the junior declared, according to Robert. He began playing the Islamic call to prayer on a speaker, the police report said.

Salomonsky was summoned to the front of the room. Robert couldn't see what was going on, but two juniors hovered over his classmate. One of the juniors placed a towel over his face, while the other junior "dripped water into his mouth," the VMI police report said. It lasted about five seconds. When he coughed, the rag was removed.

"Yum," said Salomonsky, who laughed about it.

"I wasn't like choking on air or water ... it was kind of awkward to have water go down my throat when I'm lying on my back," Salomonsky would later testify at a disciplinary hearing. "But I was never gasping for air."

Next up was Robert. He'd shaken the mattress strap loose and his hands were free, he testified at the hearing. But his feet were still duct-taped.

The junior who played the Islamic music placed a towel over his face and a second junior pushed it partially in his mouth. Then, he told The Post, one or both of them poured water over his face two different times.

On the first try, Robert was able to drink the water through the cloth and didn't choke, he testified in the disciplinary hearing. The second time, the rag was pulled taut over his mouth, he told The Post, and when the water was poured over the cloth, he struggled to breathe for a few seconds.

"As soon as [Robert] gasped for air, the towel was removed," the police report said.

The two freshmen were then ordered to wrestle shirtless, then they were duct-taped together back-to-back and told to leave, according to the police report.

Once he was back in his own bed, Robert said he felt relieved. That changed when he described what had happened to his upper-class mentors.

One of them reported the incident, triggering a criminal investigation by VMI police and consternation among college officials.

Robert's father, an active-duty Air Force colonel who works as a senior administrator for a defense and intelligence agency, was outraged. He called his son and told him he wanted him to leave VMI. But Robert refused.

Breakout — the end of the rat line — was just around the corner.

"I told him: 'Dude, I think you're broken. I think you have Stockholm syndrome,'" the father said in an interview.

When he was interviewed by a VMI police officer, one of the juniors who conducted the waterboarding claimed the freshmen were "enjoying themselves" that night. The report also alleged Robert laughed after being waterboarded and said, "Do it again" — claims Robert disputes.

"I didn't laugh like I was enjoying it. I might have chuckled nervously. I was scared," Robert told The Post. He didn't know what would follow. "I thought there was a potential for them to violate me."

The officer concluded the night's activities met the state code's definition of hazing, but not the criminal code's requirements for hazing charges since Robert and Salomonsky were not physically injured, according to her later testimony at a VMI disciplinary hearing. She thought assault and battery were possible charges, too, but it was up to Robert and Salomonsky to press for them. Neither wanted to.

Now, the case was in VMI's hands.

The college's superintendent at the time, retired Army Gen. J.H. Binford Peay III, was especially upset, according to VMI's then-commandant Bill Wanovich. Peay called the incident a breach of law and an abuse of the rat line system, Wanovich testified.

By mid-February, the college handed down its punishments: One-year suspensions for the two juniors who waterboarded the freshmen and the senior who helped organize the rat mission, according to court documents. The two other defendants in Robert's lawsuit were given a combination of demerits, campus confinement and penalty marching tours.

The next day, one of the juniors wrote Robert a lengthy apology.

"Please don't share this with any of your [brother rats]," he wrote. "We were 100% wrong for what happened in that room that night and nothing will ever make what happened okay."

The suspended senior, who also emailed Robert an apology, appealed his punishment. He argued before a panel of three VMI administrators that the night didn't constitute "hazing or conduct unbecoming of anyone at VMI."

It was so dark in the room, he testified, that he had no clue about what he called "the alleged waterboarding incident" until he was told about it the next day. He assumed the other upperclassmen were pouring water on the rats' heads — a "baptism" rats sometimes do for rat missions.

When Robert took the stand, the senior cross-examined him, asking: "Did you feel that what happened was in kind of a good-natured spirit?"

"Kind of, yeah," Robert testified.

Did you enjoy the rat mission? he asked.

"I was more — I just wanted to get back to bed, really," Robert said.

In his closing remarks, the senior said he was just doing what he thought was normal for VMI.

"I came here to VMI. I was taught rats are given different forms of difficulty as [rites] of passage. I certainly was, and it was okay," he said in his closing statement. "I thought it was very cool to be part of a tradition and passing down this tradition."

Days after the hearing, the senior learned that Peay had upheld the suspension, according to his attorney, Will Woodrow.

He said VMI's decision to suspend the senior and the other cadets was too harsh.

"It was a heavy-handed response that showed insecurity on the part of VMI and about its rat line," Woodrow said. "They know it's gotten a bad rap, I am sure, deservedly so for incidents over the years."

The senior wound up graduating from VMI in 2019. One accolade he listed on his LinkedIn profile: “Distinguished Military Graduate.”

Marine and Army officers

One by one, the students involved in the waterboarding case have entered the military as officers.

The Marine second lieutenant Robert saw in the Facebook photo is now a platoon commander, according to a Marine spokeswoman. The other VMI graduate who participated in the waterboarding is expected to commission into the Army in 2022, his lawyer said.

The senior who helped initiate the rat mission is a Marine who specializes as an air intelligence officer, a Marine spokesman said.

The Post asked spokespeople for the Marines and the Army whether a college student who has been suspended for having a role in a waterboarding incident would be disqualified from becoming an officer.

Lt. Col. Rob Dolan, a spokesman for the Marine Corps Recruiting Command, said the Marines screen applicants for criminal history. Candidates who have committed “questionable actions” that did not result in criminal charges would have to voluntarily reveal that information to determine whether a waiver is necessary.

The U.S. Army Cadet Command, which oversees the nation’s ROTC programs, said in a statement that when a cadet commits a potentially “disqualifying” act in college, they can face a “disenrollment” board, which reviews evidence and makes a recommendation to a commander. Even if a disqualifying act occurred, the board can still endorse retention.

The cadet planning to commission into the Army nearly lost his chance to become an officer. After he graduated from VMI in May 2020, the U.S. Army Cadet Command initiated disenrollment proceedings against him after learning about the lawsuit in [a Post article](#), said his lawyer, David Sheldon.

Eventually, after a hearing in which the VMI graduate acknowledged his wrongdoing, the Army made its ruling, Sheldon said. He could become an officer.

Leaving VMI

By the end of his freshman year, Robert decided he couldn’t remain at VMI. He’d been facing insults on the anonymous social media app Yik Yak. And one of the cadets who’d been in the room when he was waterboarded was elected to one of the most powerful positions on campus for the next academic year: vice president for investigations of the school’s Honor Court.

“[Robert] was terrified,” said his mentor, Andrew Heinlein, now a Navy junior officer based in Georgia. “He was thinking, ‘If I came back to the school the next academic year then there’s a good chance the school might get me through the Honor Court.’ VMI failed him.”

Robert transferred to Virginia Tech, entering its Corps of Cadets.

In his federal lawsuit, he accused VMI, the superintendent and commandant of gender discrimination in violation of Title IX: “willfully [turning] a blind eye to incidents of hazing involving male cadets” while strictly policing abusive behavior toward female cadets.

The college, he argued, created a “discriminatory hostile educational environment” in which the hazing of male cadets is widespread. He also claimed he was sexually assaulted and sexually harassed when he was forced to wrestle shirtless against another male cadet in front of the other students. If two female cadets had been ordered to wrestle naked in the presence of male cadets, he said, VMI would have initiated a Title IX investigation.

Virginia's office of the attorney general, which represented VMI and its administrators, disputed those claims and filed a motion to dismiss the lawsuit.

In October 2020, federal judge Norman Moon agreed, dismissing the case. Moon said Robert's examples of hazing incidents did not "rise to the level of a policy or practice that is legally cognizable as discriminatory." He also said that Robert failed to pinpoint any policy showing VMI condones hazing of male cadets. As for his sexual assault claims, Moon said Robert did not plausibly argue "there was any sexual nature" to the shirtless wrestling.

Robert, though, was not giving up. The next month, in November 2020, he brought a separate lawsuit in state court against the three suspended cadets, plus two others in the room that night, once again accusing them of assault, battery, false imprisonment, civil conspiracy and violating the state's hazing law. He's seeking \$850,000 in compensatory and punitive damages, as well as legal fees.

The five VMI graduates are fighting the new lawsuit, arguing in court filings that Robert wasn't waterboarded, wasn't injured and "consented" to the night's activities

All five declined interview requests or did not respond to messages left by The Post.

'The man he's become'

In May, it was Robert's turn to graduate and commission.

Side by side, he and his father, the Air Force colonel, stood on a plaza in the middle of Virginia Tech's campus, both dressed in their uniforms. Robert's two younger brothers held flags upright, one an American flag, the other a red Marine banner. The only person missing was Robert's mom, who died of cancer in 2016, the year before he enrolled at VMI.

"During these last four years, there's been some tough times," his father said to dozens of friends and family who had gathered on the plaza. Robert looked down and held his hands together. "When I think about [my son] as the man he's become. ... Talk about honor. I mean, [he's] here because he tried to help someone out, and he had honor."

Then, the father and son stood at attention facing each other, each holding up their right hand as Robert recited his military oath, and declared his rank: second lieutenant in the U.S. Marine Corps.

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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	01/03 South Africa: parliament fire arson arrest
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/south-african-police-charge-man-with-arson-over-damaging-blaze-parliament-2022-01-03/
GIST	<p>CAPE TOWN, Jan 3 (Reuters) - South African police said on Monday they had charged a man with arson over a fire that caused extensive damage to the national parliament building in Cape Town, as firefighters struggled to extinguish the last remains of the blaze.</p> <p>The fire broke out early on Sunday at the parliamentary complex, some of which dates back to 1884 and includes the National Assembly, or lower House of Parliament.</p> <p>It caused the collapse of the roof of a part of the complex housing the upper chamber, or National Council of Provinces (NCOP), on Sunday and gutted an entire floor, though there were no reports of anybody being hurt in the incident.</p>

	<p>A 49-year-old suspect arrested in connection with the blaze is expected to appear in court on Tuesday and will face charges of housebreaking and theft as well as arson, an elite police unit known as the Hawks said in a statement.</p> <p>"It is alleged that he gained entrance through the window in one of the offices," Hawks spokesperson Nomthandazo Mbambo told eNCA television, adding that investigations were continuing into how the suspect had managed to evade security at the parliament.</p> <p>"There is a possibility of other charges being added as there was a security breach here," Mbambo said.</p> <p>'STILL SMOULDERING'</p> <p>Jean-Pierre Smith, a Cape Town mayoral committee member responsible for safety and security, said firefighters were still dealing on Monday with "hotspots on the 4th floor of the National Assembly which is still smouldering".</p> <p>"Lots of books and bookshelves (are) smouldering," he said, adding that the interior of the National Assembly had been extensively destroyed by fire, water, heat and smoke.</p> <p>The National Assembly is situated in what is known as the New Wing, which suffered the worst damage in the blaze. The fire was more quickly contained on Sunday in the Old Wing, parliamentary authorities said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/03 US Marshals rescue 5 missing teen girls
SOURCE	https://www.foxnews.com/us/five-teen-teenage-girls-recovered-and-30-sex-offenders-arrested-in-new-orleans-marshals-operation
GIST	<p>A U.S. Marshals-led task force recovered five missing teenage girls in an operation that resulted in the arrests of 30 sex offenders in the New Orleans, Louisiana, area.</p> <p>"Operation Boo Dat," which was conducted between mid-October and Dec. 24, resulted in the rescue of five teenage girls between the ages of 14 and 17 and the arrests of 30, including 17 who were accused of felony sex offender registration violations, the U.S. Marshals said in a press release last week.</p> <p>The operation was conducted in cooperation with the New Orleans Police Department, Orleans Parish Sheriff's Office, Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office, Louisiana State Police and USMS New Orleans Task Force.</p> <p>Among those arrested was a man who was wanted for the rape of a 12-year-old girl near New Orleans and another man who was wanted in the sexual assault of a 14-year-old girl in June in Texas.</p> <p>One of the recovered teens was a 16-year-old girl who ran away from her New Orleans-area home after allegedly stealing a relative's car and a handgun. She was eventually found "living with several adults to include an adult female strip club dancer."</p> <p>Two teens recovered in the operations were sisters ages 15 and 16 who "may be victims of adult(s) felony criminal sexual activities," the press release said. Those girls were recovered in a Baton Rouge apartment.</p> <p>"During Operation Boo Dat over one hundred sex offender compliance checks were also attempted or completed in Orleans and Jefferson Parishes," the press release said. "Sex Offender compliance checks require law enforcement officers to go to the sex offender's reported address of residence to verify that the person still lives at the provided address. Often countless hours of follow up investigative work are required during and after a compliance check."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/03 Capitol Police chief: threat much higher
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SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/january-6-tom-manger-capitol-police-chief-threat-level-warning/
GIST	<p>The chief of the United States Capitol Police said the department needs help keeping up with a surge in threats to lawmakers and the Capitol complex itself.</p> <p>"The threat level is much higher than it was a year ago," said chief Tom Manger in an interview with CBS News. "It's exponentially higher than it was five years ago."</p> <p>The cases include communications or actions intended to inflict physical, psychological or other harm on lawmakers and the Capitol building, as well as so-called "Direction of Interest" cases, such as disturbing social media posts, stalking or harassment.</p> <p>In all, such threats totaled about 9,600 in 2021, he said.</p> <p>"Right now, we're prioritizing the ones that are most concerning," Manger said. "We're going to have to get additional folks to handle these kinds of threats."</p> <p>Still, Manger said his agency has taken steps to prevent a repeat of the riot that occurred last January 6.</p> <p>"There could be a situation where something unexpected happens that we're not prepared for, but I will tell you that today, it is much less likely something like [January 6] could occur because of the things that we've put into place."</p> <p>Manger said the department has specifically addressed areas such as planning for big demonstrations, intelligence gathering and making sure officers have the training and equipment they need.</p> <p>Testifying before the Senate last month, the department's inspector general, Michael Bolton, told lawmakers that though there have been security improvements, the department still has more to do to make the Capitol building and grounds "safe and secure."</p> <p>In a series of reports throughout the year, Bolton reviewed the failures that let rioters overrun officers and enter the Capitol, and made recommendations for improvement. In Bolton's final report, obtained by CBS News, his office revealed that out of 104 recommendations, only 30 had been fully implemented.</p> <p>Manger said the department is in the process of addressing most of the remaining recommendations. He said training continues to be an area in need of "significant improvement."</p> <p>"It's a difficult challenge right now because we're so short-staffed that some of the things that we could do in terms of training can't be done because we can't free up officers from their duties to address some of the training needs," Manger said.</p> <p>About 130 officers have left the force since January 6, a spokesman for the department told CBS News last month. Manger said he wants to hire 400 additional sworn officers total, and the department has a plan in place to hire about 280 this year. Bolton cautioned that efforts to increase hiring would not be a quick fix because training new recruits takes about a year.</p> <p>To investigate threats more efficiently, Manger said the department has opened two field offices in Florida and California, the two states where the department has the most cases.</p> <p>"It's paid off in terms of some of the cases that we've had to look into," Manger said.</p> <p>Yet, officials tell CBS News threats are up because temperatures are running high when it comes to the country's political discourse.</p> <p>"It remains to be seen if it just keeps increasing at the level that it has increased," Manger said. "Or do we as a country get to a point where enough people say 'enough is enough, you know, this is not good for our nation to have this level of vitriol.'"</p>

HEADLINE	01/03 Hate crimes soaring; video games as tool
SOURCE	https://www.inquirer.com/news/pennsylvania-researchers-combat-white-supremacists-extremism-philadelphia-20220103.html
GIST	<p>They arrived in yellow rental trucks, unfurled their flags, and readied shields and smoke bombs. The hour was late, and the symbolism was unsettling: As the clock inched close to midnight on July 3, about 200 members of the white nationalist group Patriot Front marched through downtown Philadelphia, past Independence Hall and other historic landmarks, while chanting, “Take America back!”</p> <p>If the demonstration was meant to be a show of strength for the organization, it ended meekly. After scuffling with a handful of counterprotesters, the Patriot Front members retreated into their Penske trucks and then were stopped by Philadelphia police on Delaware Avenue, where some marchers sat dejectedly, their heads bowed.</p> <p>But the episode served a dual purpose. Social media has proven to be fertile ground for white supremacist and conspiracy-theory movements trying to attract new members. Patriot Front turned footage of its parade through the city into a hype video; on its website, its members likened themselves to Revolutionary War heroes, and insisted, “Americans must dictate America.”</p> <p>A month before the Philadelphia demonstration, more than 300 researchers and scholars had volunteered to be part of a new effort to curb the spread of extremism: the Collaboratory Against Hate, a center created by the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University.</p> <p>The project is well-timed. More than 8,000 hate crimes were reported in the United States in 2020, the highest total in more than a decade, according to the FBI. In Philadelphia, 63 people were reported as victims of hate crimes, a 320% increase from 2019, when there were 15 victims. Statewide, the number of victims doubled in 2020 to 110, but that’s likely a low estimate; of Pennsylvania’s 1,504 law enforcement agencies, just 734 supplied data to the FBI.</p> <p>“We’re pushing back at something I hear a lot, which is ‘Well, people are always going to hate some people. Hate is human nature, and we’re stuck with it, and there’s always going to be hate groups,’” said Kathleen Blee, the Collaboratory’s co-director.</p> <p>“But it’s not like everybody is racist, and we’re doomed to this. ... There is a deeper, more entrenched, more destructive side of extremism and political conspiracy that is not part of human nature. It is deliberately constructed, like anti-Semitism is deliberately constructed in these groups. We just need to apply our tools to get past that. And make that impossible.”</p> <p>‘Into the rabbit hole’</p> <p>Collaboratory researchers are first digging into three areas — digital-content moderation, extremism in the military, and youth and extremism. The last, Blee said, is a newer trend she finds particularly worrisome.</p> <p>White supremacists are using online video-game communities and streaming platforms to approach and recruit teenagers and middle schoolers. Some entreaties start with jokes, or by introducing white supremacist phrases to pique a child’s interest; others share links to material that lure young gamers deeper.</p> <p>“That’s one of the most disturbing, and one of the least known, phenomena,” said Blee, who has studied white supremacy since the 1980s. “We’re just starting to get a handle on it. For some children, that’s probably an approach that pulls them into the rabbit hole.”</p> <p>White supremacist narratives rely on a combination of elements to hook recruits: the offer of a collective identity, revelations about sinister conspiracies, and the promise of righting perceived grievances.</p>

“Getting into that mind-set, and into that world, virtually or in real life, can be such a fundamentally self-altering experience that it really can be quite difficult to firmly pull yourself out,” Blee said.

Her concerns about hate groups recruiting minors were borne out by a 2021 survey conducted by the Anti-Defamation League, which found that 10% of gamers aged 13 to 17 had encountered white supremacist ideology while participating in online multiplayer games, and 60% had experienced some form of harassment.

“They hear people talk about the superiority of the white race, and the desire of a white homeland,” said Daniel Kelley, the associate director of the ADL’s Center for Technology and Society.

Kelley theorizes that large numbers of white supremacists aren’t flocking to online games to recruit new members; instead, savvy ones have just learned to exploit a realm that is inherently vulnerable.

In the wake of the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, Facebook and [Twitter banned the accounts](#) of former President Donald Trump, and thousands affiliated with far-right extremists, white nationalists, and the conspiracy movement QAnon. And Facebook faced congressional scrutiny when a whistle-blower accused the company of [allowing misinformation to spread](#).

But Kelley said there’s little oversight of online gaming ecosystems, or “gaming adjacent” platforms like Twitch, Steam, and Discord, with some companies flatly opposed to content moderation.

Instead, they’ve become environments where hate speech “can be normalized in a dangerous way.”

The majority of parents who responded to the ADL’s survey said they don’t set security controls on games their kids use, and most teens don’t tell their parents about uncomfortable exchanges they’ve had, which can include stalking, intimidation, and threats of harm.

Kelley argues it’s a mistake to draw a distinction between online and offline extremism.

“There’s a tendency to call offline life ‘real life,’” he said. “But every time there’s an interaction in a digital space, there’s a real person behind that screen.”

And even one person who espouses hatred and violent fantasies online can cause unimaginable harm.

A growing threat

During her decades of research into white supremacist movements, Blee detected a pattern. “It can appear that it’s strengthening and weakening, but often what it’s really doing is crossing the line of public visibility,” she said. “It sinks below the line, and rises above the line.”

In the 1980s, many hate groups found themselves marginalized. They grew bolder in the 1990s — national preparedness expos became a [big-tent gathering spot for militia groups and conspiracy theorists](#), and in 1995, an antigovernment terrorist who [described white nationalists as his “brother in arms”](#) blew up a federal building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people, including 19 children.

Extremist movements multiplied at a dizzying pace in recent years, and the COVID-19 pandemic and the Jan. 6 insurrection have only energized those who want to see the U.S. government overthrown. More than 700 participants in the Capitol attack have faced federal prosecution.

And in November, a federal jury ordered more than a dozen [white nationalist leaders to pay \\$26 million in damages](#) over the violence that erupted at a 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Va., which left one counterprotester dead. (Patriot Front, which marched in Philadelphia and [distributed propaganda on local college campuses](#), was formed by some members of a neo-Nazi group that took part in the Virginia rally.)

“On the extremist side, we still see a momentum,” Blee said, “not a demobilization.”

In November, the Department of Homeland Security [warned](#) that “racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists” pose a continuing threat to the nation, and might use pandemic-related health restrictions as a reason to target government officials.

Months earlier, ABC News reported that FBI agents in San Antonio concluded in a confidential intelligence assessment that white supremacists were seeking to infiltrate law enforcement and the military to “[prepare for and initiate a collapse of society](#)” and harm racial and ethnic minorities.

The Collaboratory Against Hate hopes to shape the data and other insights its researchers assemble into tools that can blunt the growth of extremism.

That mission grows more urgent by the day.

Two days after Christmas, a 47-year-old man named Lyndon McLeod zigzagged across Denver, shot a police officer, and [murdered five people](#) at a pair of tattoo shops and a hotel. McLeod was killed by the same officer he had wounded.

McLeod left behind a digital footprint that led, unsurprisingly, to dark obsessions and familiar, twisted ideologies. He wrote books under a pen name that, [according to Newsweek](#), included fantasies about committing a mass shooting, and regurgitated white supremacists’ hatred for Black and Muslim people.

On Twitter, he pined for “retributive violence” and complained that aggressive white males have become irrelevant.

“War,” he wrote, “is coming.”

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HEADLINE	01/03 Struggle to deter catalytic converter thefts
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/police-struggle-to-deter-rising-catalytic-converter-thefts/
GIST	<p>RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — In the tiny town of Lawrenceville, Virginia, a van owned by Poplar Mount Baptist Church was knocked out of commission for weeks after thieves cut the catalytic converter out of its exhaust system.</p> <p>Several months later, across town, a catalytic converter was ripped from a van owned by First Baptist Church.</p> <p>Similar crimes followed, targeting a total of 15 church vans and 13 other vehicles in town, part of a nationwide surge in thefts of catalytic converters.</p> <p>Thefts of the exhaust emission control devices have jumped over the past two years as prices for the precious metals they contain have skyrocketed. Thieves can expect to get anywhere from \$50 to \$300 if they sell the converters to scrap yards, which then sell them to recycling facilities to reclaim the precious metals inside, including platinum, palladium and rhodium.</p> <p>For victims, the costs of replacing a stolen catalytic converter can easily top \$1,000 and make their vehicle undrivable for days or weeks as the part is ordered and installed. It can also leave owners feeling vulnerable.</p> <p>“Just to feel that the church property was invaded by thieves was disheartening,” said John Robinson, a member of Poplar Mount Baptist Church.</p> <p>Robinson said replacing the stolen converter cost about \$1,000. The theft was covered by insurance, but the church had to pay its \$250 deductible and was unable to use the van for six weeks as it sat in a mechanic’s yard waiting for a new part.</p>

The National Insurance Crime Bureau said the number of catalytic converter thefts reported in claims to insurance companies jumped from 3,389 in 2019 to 14,433 in 2020. NICB President David Glawe said there has been a significant increase in thefts since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“It’s an opportunistic crime,” Glawe said in a statement. “As the value of the precious metals contained within the catalytic converters continues to increase, so do the number of thefts of these devices. There is a clear connection between times of crisis, limited resources, and disruption of the supply chain that drives investors towards these precious metals.”

The increase in thefts has prompted states across the country to toughen penalties and impose new requirements for scrap metal dealers who buy the converters. Ten states enacted new legislation in 2021, including laws in Arkansas, South Carolina and Texas that require scrap metal buyers of used converters to maintain records of purchases, including proof of ownership, vehicle identification numbers, the seller’s home address and driver’s license numbers, according to the insurance crime bureau.

In North Carolina, a law that went into effect Dec. 1 makes catalytic converter thefts a Class I felony and requires businesses that buy used catalytic converters to get documentation and maintain detailed records on people who sell the devices to them.

A bill modeled after the North Carolina law will be introduced in Virginia when the legislature reconvenes in January. The measure would make the theft of a catalytic converter a felony and presume that anyone in possession of one that’s been removed from a vehicle has obtained it illegally unless the person is an authorized scrap seller or has a bill of sale, receipt or other documentation.

“It would make it more risky for the thieves to steal them,” said Sen. Frank Ruff Jr., who is sponsoring the bill. “The sellers would have to show more identification, and then at the same time, the salvage dealer would not want to get in trouble so he’d be less likely to allow them to sell to him.”

Brunswick County Sheriff Brian Roberts, who has seen the number of thefts in his rural area grow from seven to nine annually to 28 this year, said converters can be stolen in minutes. Thieves need only crawl under a vehicle and use a battery-operated reciprocating saw to cut through the metal and remove the part, he said.

In Henrico County, where about 540 catalytic converters have been reported stolen this year, police have produced public service announcements to raise awareness.

David Overby, owner of Auto Repairs Plus, said he spent more than \$5,000 on lighting and a security system with cameras after thieves repeatedly stole catalytic converters off his customers’ cars in his parking lot. Overby said police arrested two people caught on his cameras stealing converters, but he said under the current law, they were only charged with a misdemeanor.

“These people have got to be held accountable in some way, not given a slap on their wrist,” Overby said.

At Chesterfield Auto Parts, where customers can pull parts from junked cars, owner Troy Webber said his workers remove catalytic converters before the vehicles are made available to the public, then lock the devices in steel containers before selling them to auto recyclers. That doesn’t stop thieves from trying to break in, he said.

“People cut through our fence constantly to try to steal the catalytic converters,” he said.

Henrico police Chief Eric English said catalytic converters have been cut from vehicles parked in homeowners’ driveways. Police have advised people about theft prevention measures, including protective shields and covers for the converters. They’ve also offered to stencil a mark on catalytic converters to allow scrap yard dealers and recyclers to more easily identify a stolen converter.

	“It’s definitely something we have to get a hold of because it’s causing a lot of families and a lot of people some heartburn,” English said. “It’s not something people deserve to have happen to them.”
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HEADLINE	01/03 Yemen rebels seize UAE ship
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/jerusalem-post-hacked-iran-generals-killing-anniversary-82047383
GIST	<p>DUBAI, United Arab Emirates -- Yemen’s Houthi rebels seized an Emirati-flagged ship in the Red Sea, officials said Monday, the latest sign of Mideast tensions as hackers targeted a major Israeli newspaper’s website to mark America’s 2020 killing of a top Iranian general.</p> <p>The seizure of the Rwabee marks the latest assault in the Red Sea, a crucial route for international trade and energy shipments. The Iranian-backed Houthis acknowledged the incident off the coast of Hodeida, a long-contested prize of the grinding war in Yemen.</p> <p>No group immediately claimed responsibility for the hacking of the Jerusalem Post. The hackers replaced the Post’s homepage with an image depicting a missile coming down from a fist bearing a ring long associated with Qassem Soleimani, the Iranian general killed by a U.S. drone strike in Iraq two years ago.</p> <p>First word of the Rwabee’s seizure came from the British military’s United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations, which only said an attack targeted an unnamed vessel around midnight. The coordinates it offered corresponded to the Emirati-flagged landing craft Rwabee, which hadn’t given its location via satellite-tracking data for hours, according to the website MarineTraffic.com.</p> <p>A statement from the Saudi-led coalition, carried by state media in the kingdom, acknowledged the attack hours later, saying the Houthis had committed an act of “armed piracy” involving the vessel. The coalition asserted the ship carried medical equipment from a dismantled Saudi field hospital in the distant island of Socotra, without offering evidence.</p> <p>“The Houthi militia must immediately release the ship, otherwise the coalition forces shall take all necessary measures and procedures to deal with this violation, including the use of force,” Brig. Gen. Turki al-Malki said in a statement.</p> <p>A Houthi military spokesman, Yahia Sarei, announced that rebel forces had seized what he described as an Emirati “military cargo ship” carrying equipment into Yemen’s territorial waters “without any license” to engage in “hostile acts” against Yemen’s stability. He said the rebels would offer more details on the seizure later.</p> <p>An employee at the vessel’s owners, Abu Dhabi-based Liwa Marine Services, told The Associated Press that the Rwabee appeared to have been the target but said they had no other information and declined to comment further. The employee did not give her name and hung up.</p> <p>A similar incident happened in 2016 involving the Emirati vessel SWIFT-1, which had been sailing back and forth in the Red Sea between an Emirati troop base in Eritrea and Yemen. The vessel came under attack by Houthi forces in 2016. The Emirati government asserted the SWIFT-1 had carried humanitarian aid; U.N. experts later said of the claim that they were “unconvinced of its veracity.”</p> <p>In the attack targeting the Jerusalem Post’s website, the image posted by the hackers depicts an exploding target from a recent Iranian military drill designed to look like the Shimon Peres Negev Nuclear Research Center near the city of Dimona. The facility is already home to decades-old underground laboratories that reprocess the reactor’s spent rods to obtain weapons-grade plutonium for Israel’s nuclear bomb program.</p> <p>Under its policy of nuclear ambiguity, Israel neither confirms nor denies having atomic weapons.</p> <p>In a tweet, the Post acknowledged being the target of hackers.</p>

“We are aware of the apparent hacking of our website, alongside a direct threat to Israel,” the English-language newspaper wrote. “We are working to resolve the issue & thank readers for your patience and understanding.”

The newspaper later restored its website. It noted Iran-supporting hackers previously targeted its homepage in 2020 “with an illustration of Tel Aviv burning as then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu swam” with a life preserver.

There was no immediate response from the Israeli government. The hack comes after Israel’s former military intelligence chief in late December publicly acknowledged his country was involved in Soleimani’s killing. The U.S. drone killed Soleimani as he was leaving Baghdad’s international airport.

In Iraq on Monday, troops shot down two so-called “suicide drones” at the Baghdad airport, American and Iraqi officials said. No group immediately claimed the attack, though militias backed by Iran have been suspected in similar assaults. No injuries or damage were reported in the incident.

Iran also did not immediately acknowledge the hack. However, the country has in recent days stepped up its commemorations of the slain Revolutionary Guard general. Memorial services were scheduled to be held Monday for Soleimani.

As the head of the Quds, or Jerusalem, Force of the Revolutionary Guard, Soleimani led all of its expeditionary forces and frequently shuttled between Iraq, Lebanon and Syria. Quds Force members have deployed into Syria’s long war to support President Bashar Assad, as well as into Iraq in the wake of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion that toppled dictator Saddam Hussein, a longtime foe of Tehran.

Soleimani rose to prominence by advising forces fighting the Islamic State group in Iraq and in Syria on behalf of the embattled Assad.

U.S. officials say the Guard under Soleimani taught Iraqi militants how to manufacture and use especially deadly roadside bombs against U.S. troops after the invasion of Iraq. Iran has denied that. Many Iranians to this day see Soleimani as a hero who fought Iran’s enemies abroad.

Tensions have been high in the region amid a shadow war between Iran and Israel, as well as the collapse of Tehran’s nuclear deal with world powers after then-President Donald Trump in 2018 unilaterally withdrew America from the accord. Negotiations aimed at resuscitating the deal continue in Vienna.

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HEADLINE	12/31 Gun battle Philadelphia street: 6 wounded
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/crime-philadelphia-a1eb5a6098508e5f195183b2c4f2058b
GIST	<p>PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Six gunmen fired more than 65 rounds on a Philadelphia street, sending nighttime pedestrians on a busy block teeming with markets and restaurants scrambling for cover and injuring six people, at least one of them critically, police said Friday.</p> <p>Police responded around 11:30 p.m. Thursday in the Germantown neighborhood and found a 21-year-old woman shot multiple times in the abdomen and chest and lying near dozens of spent casings. Officers rushed her to the hospital, where she was in critical condition Friday.</p> <p>Five men ages 19 to 29 were taken with gunshot wounds by private vehicles to two hospitals, police said. All were expected to survive.</p> <p>Officers are looking at surveillance footage, Chief Inspector Scott Small told reporters late Thursday. Police released surveillance footage Friday showing six men jump out of a van and begin shooting. The footage also shows shots being fired back as individuals from both groups dodged between parked cars to get away from each other.</p>

	<p>It was unclear if any of the men seeking treatment at the hospital were part of the group who jumped out of the van, starting the fight. Police had initially said based on the casings that at least two different gunmen fired weapons.</p> <p>The injured woman, who suffered the most gunshot wounds, may have been the intended target, Small said. But the extensive crime scene — with a sea of casings on Germantown Avenue and bullets from at least two different-caliber semiautomatic weapons striking parked cars — made it difficult to be certain.</p> <p>“The fact that we found over 65 spent shell casings — that’s a whole lot of shots fired — so it’s hard to even say who is the intended target and who is struck by stray gunfire,” Small said.</p> <p>A Philadelphia city website tracking shooting victims and homicides showed that as of Tuesday, there were 1,827 nonfatal shooting victims in 2021, an increase of more than 600 from pre-pandemic levels in 2019.</p> <p>Philadelphia police showed 559 homicides going into the last day of 2021, the most recorded since the city began tracking in 1960.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/01 Mall of America shooting: 2 wounded
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/shootings-minnesota-minneapolis-64d84194b55dfa48cb99d4a9d7bdcee1
GIST	<p>MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Two people were shot and wounded Friday following an apparent altercation at the Mall of America, sending New Year’s Eve shoppers scrambling for safety and placing the Minneapolis mall on temporary lockdown, authorities said.</p> <p>One man suffered a gunshot wound to the leg during the shooting that happened about 4:30 p.m. on the third floor of the mall and another person was grazed, police said. Shoppers ran for cover and the mall was evacuated until the lockdown ended about 45 minutes later, a mall official said during a news briefing.</p> <p>Deputy Bloomington Police Chief Kim Clauson said police and mall security arrived within a minute of shooting. The man shot in the leg was taken to a hospital, while a second victim was treated at the scene and released. Both injuries were considered non-life-threatening.</p> <p>No arrests have been made and the suspect is believed to have fled the mall, police said. Clauson said the shooting did not appear to be random.</p> <p>“It does appear there was an altercation between two males before the shot was fired,” Clauson said.</p> <p>Alexis Gonzalez, who works at the mall, told the Star Tribune that “when we heard the shot and heard the screams we all got frazzled.”</p> <p>Gonzalez said he saw people running as the mall lockdown alarms began, and people rushed into his store.</p> <p>Media reports showed New Year’s Eve shoppers screaming and running from the mall. Police said the lockdown was lifted by Friday evening and officers were no longer searching for a suspect inside. The mall, which had been scheduled to close at 6 p.m., remained closed.</p> <p>The Mall of America bans guns on its premises, according to its website. The mall does not utilize metal detectors and shoppers are not searched upon entry. Mall spokesperson Dan Jasper said lockdown drills are performed each month to prepare for shooting scenarios.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/01 Arrests: shooting 2 Illinois police officers
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/suspect-custody-large-connection-shooting-illinois-officers/story?id=82024167

GIST	<p>Police have arrested two suspects wanted in connection with the shooting of two Illinois police officers that left one of them dead, authorities said.</p> <p>One of the suspects, Darius Sullivan, 25, was taken into custody Friday morning without incident after authorities conducted a search warrant on a home in North Manchester, Indiana, police said. Narcotics and multiple weapons were found inside the home, according to Indiana State Police Sgt. Glen Fifield.</p> <p>Sullivan had warrants out of Illinois for his arrest on first-degree murder, attempted murder and aggravated battery with firearm charges, Fifield said, in connection with Wednesday's fatal shooting at a hotel in Kankakee County, Illinois.</p> <p>Bradley Police Department Sgt. Marlene Rittmanic, 49, was killed after responding to a noise complaint at a Comfort Inn, authorities said. Her partner, Officer Tyler Bailey, 27, was wounded in the shooting and remains hospitalized in critical condition, Illinois State Police said in an update Thursday night.</p> <p>Sullivan, of Bourbonnais, Illinois, will be transferred to the Kankakee County Sheriff's Department, Fifield said. Police are still determining his connection to the North Manchester residence. It is unclear if he has an attorney.</p> <p>An arrest warrant had also been issued for a second suspect in connection with the shooting, Xandria Harris, 26, of Bradley, Illinois, state police said. She was not present at the North Manchester home when Sullivan was taken into custody, according to Fifield.</p> <p>Hours after Sullivan's arrest, Harris turned herself in at the Bradley Police Department while accompanied by her attorney, according to the Kankakee County Sheriff's Department. She was taken into custody Friday afternoon by investigators with the Illinois State Police, authorities said, and she is being held at the Jerome D. Combs Adult Detention Facility.</p> <p>She faces multiple charges, including first-degree murder and attempted murder. ABC News was unable to reach her attorney.</p> <p>"In a multi-jurisdictional effort, two alleged cop killers have been taken into custody today and will now face justice," Illinois State Police Director Brendan Kelly said in a statement Friday. "The Law Enforcement family and the community lost a devoted officer, and another continues to fight for his life."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/01 Judge rejects Prince Andrew lawsuit block
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/jan/01/prince-andrew-lawsuit-virginia-giuffre-effort-block-rejected
GIST	<p>Two of Prince Andrew's efforts to prevent or stall the progression of Virginia Roberts Giuffre's sex assault lawsuit against him were blocked on Saturday when a US federal judge ordered the prince's lawyers to turn over key legal documents, increasing pressure to settle claims before a crucial court hearing this week.</p> <p>Judge Lewis A Kaplan, in a written order, told the prince's lawyers they must turn over documents on the schedule that has been set in the lawsuit brought by Giuffre who claims she was abused – aged 17 – by the prince on multiple occasions in 2001 while she was being sexually abused by financier Jeffrey Epstein.</p> <p>Kaplan also rejected arguments by the prince's lawyer, Andrew Brettler, on jurisdiction grounds after they argued last week that the lawsuit should be dismissed because Giuffre, a US citizen, no longer lives in the US. Brettler has called the lawsuit "baseless".</p> <p>The prince's lawyers claimed evidence was so strong that Giuffre does not reside in the US that it was pointless to exchange evidence until that question is resolved because it could result in the lawsuit's dismissal.</p>

They argued that Giuffre has lived in Australia for all but two of the past 19 years, has an Australian driver's licence and lives in a \$1.9m (£1.4m) home in Perth, Western Australia, where she and her husband, an Australian national, live with their three children.

In a statement, Giuffre's attorney, Sigrid McCawley, called the request to halt the case "just another in a series of tired attempts by Prince Andrew to duck and dodge the legal merits of the case Virginia Giuffre has brought against him. All parties in litigation are subject to discovery and Prince Andrew is no exception."

Judge Kaplan, in a written order on Friday, noted the prince's lawyers have requested that "extensive" materials be turned over by Giuffre by 14 January, including documents related to where she has lived.

The rulings come before an important case hearing in New York on Tuesday, one day after the scheduled public release on Monday of a 2009 settlement agreement between Epstein and Giuffre that lawyers for Andrew had hoped would protect him from Giuffre's claims.

The developments follow revelations that Giuffre's lawyers are reportedly claiming they have up to six witnesses linking the duke to his accuser on the eve of the hearing into a civil lawsuit filed by the 38-year-old, in which she accuses Prince Andrew of sexual assault.

In a separate development, Andrew's lawyers are also reported to have not provided documentary evidence that he has the "inability to sweat", despite the claim supporting his denial against allegations he had sex with Giuffre.

The duke is also said not to have so far named any witnesses to support his alibi that he was in Pizza Express in Woking on the night in 2001 he was accused of having sex with Giuffre.

The developments intensify Andrew's predicament as he faces intense pressure over his friendship with [Ghislaine Maxwell](#).

Last Thursday Maxwell, 60, was found guilty of recruiting and trafficking young girls to be sexually abused by Epstein.

The verdict, which has no direct bearing on the Giuffre civil action, could increase public pressure for further prosecutions and push men in Epstein and Maxwell's orbit to settle actions against them.

"As to whether Prince Andrew is in greater jeopardy in terms of the civil suit now being stronger there could be some pressure on the court because the public wants to know why the users of these young girls were not held accountable," former sex crimes prosecutor Wendy Murphy told the Observer.

"The public wants a pound of flesh from the rapists – not just the pimps – but the civil suit is all about money and when the right numbers are paid the case will go away, assuming it survives the jurisdictional challenges," Murphy added.

But the duke was not named during the Maxwell proceedings and his lawyers are likely to seize on testimony from the key witness "Carolyn", who said it was Giuffre who introduced her to Epstein and Maxwell.

Separately, it is reported that Giuffre could be permitted to deliver a victim impact statement at Maxwell's sentencing. Sigrid McCawley, a lawyer for Giuffre, told the Telegraph on Saturday that she anticipates the court will hear from "many, many other women who were not able to be heard at the trial".

At the same time, government prosecutors have made no indication since Maxwell's conviction that they intend to prosecute further, either other members of Epstein's staff or alleged customers of the Epstein-Maxwell sex trafficking conspiracy. Instead, they have given signs that they are closing the book.

Last week, prosecutors dropped charges against the two detention guards who failed to check on Epstein the night of his suicide. Lawyers representing Epstein's former PA Lesley Groff, named in Epstein's 2007 non-prosecution agreement, have said they have been informed that no criminal charges will be brought against their client.

On Saturday, it was revealed that David Boies, lawyer for Giuffre, said Maxwell should have "cut a deal", a decision that indicates she could have become a state witness in a wider investigation into the elite social circle of Epstein, her ex-boyfriend.

Boies told the Times: "She could have cut a very good deal early on but she passed up that opportunity. I think that's proven to be a fatal mistake."

Giuffre's legal team have made requests for new information in readiness for a possible longer hearing, including proof of his claim during his infamous Newsnight interview that he cannot sweat.

Giuffre had stated that the prince was "sweating profusely all over me" at a London club on a night she alleges they had sex. The duke told Newsnight that her account could not be true "because I have a peculiar medical condition which is that [I don't sweat](#) or I didn't sweat at the time".

He also said that on the day in question he had taken his daughter Beatrice to a children's party at Pizza Express in the late afternoon and was at home with his children for the rest of the night.

As pressure mounts on the duke, he may be gambling on three outcomes – that the Giuffre case is thrown out after jurisdictional or other challenges, that it fails on its own merits, or that he may never have to pay the price if a judgment is made against him.

"International proceedings have so much political content. They may be couched in legal terms, but when you are trying to do something internationally, it's always political," Murphy says. "You can say I've got a judgement and I'd like it enforced, but for political reasons a foreign country can say that's nice but we don't intend to do anything about it. Why would we?"

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HEADLINE	12/31 Capitol riot: 725 arrested so far
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/12/31/capitol-deadly-attack-insurrection-arrested-convicted/
GIST	<p>Federal prosecutors in the District have charged more than 725 individuals with various crimes in connection with the deadly Jan. 6 insurrection, when hundreds of rioters forced their way into the U.S. Capitol, the U.S. attorney's office said Friday.</p> <p>As the country nears the first anniversary of the storming of the Capitol, the U.S. attorney's office in the District, the largest office of federal prosecutors in the nation, released a breakdown of the arrests and convictions associated with the attack.</p> <p>Of those arrested, 225 people were charged with assault or resisting arrest. More than 75 of those were charged with using a deadly or dangerous weapon against police officers. The office said 140 police officers, including Capitol officers and members of the D.C. police department, were victimized during the attack.</p> <p>The office said about 10 individuals were charged with assaulting members of the media or destroying their equipment.</p> <p>Some 640 people were charged with entering a restricted federal building or its grounds. And another 75 were charged with entering a restricted area with a deadly weapon.</p> <p>Prosecutors in the office have been working with the FBI as well as prosecutors in various locations around the nation. The office said the individuals arrested come from nearly all 50 states.</p>

One person, 35-year-old [Ashli Babbitt](#) of California, was fatally shot by a Capitol Police officer as she tried to breach a set of doors deep in the Capitol during the riot. Federal prosecutors later cleared the officer of any wrongdoing in Babbitt's death.

According to a May estimate by the Architect of the Capitol, the attack caused about \$1.5 million worth of damage to the building.

About 165 individuals, the office said, have pleaded guilty to a variety of federal charges, from misdemeanors to felony obstruction.

So far, 70 defendants have received some kind of sentence from a judge. Of those, 31 people were ordered jailed, and 18 were sentenced to home detention. The remaining 21 defendants were placed on probation.

In early December, [Robert Scott Palmer, 54](#), of Largo, Fla., received the longest prison sentence to date among those convicted in the attack. A U.S. District Court judge sentenced him to more than five years in prison.

In October, Palmer pleaded guilty to resisting arrest and assaulting officers with a dangerous weapon. Prosecutors said Palmer broke into the Capitol building and, while inside, threw a wooden plank at police officers; then, they said, while he was on the front line of the riot, he sprayed police officers with a fire extinguisher and hurled the emptied extinguisher at the officers. No officers, prosecutors said, were injured.

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HEADLINE	01/01 Off-duty NYPD officer shot sleeping in car
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/01/nyregion/nypd-officer-shooting-police-station.html
GIST	<p>A New York City police officer was hospitalized in stable condition after being shot while sleeping in a car outside a station house in East Harlem early on Saturday, Mayor Eric Adams said at a news conference hours after he was sworn in as the city's leader.</p> <p>The officer, whose name was not released, had worked an eight-hour shift on New Year's Eve, officials said, and went to sleep in his personal car in a parking lot next to the 25th Precinct station house on East 119th Street to rest before his next shift began at 7 a.m.</p> <p>When the officer woke up around 6:15 a.m., he noticed that his rear window was shattered and he felt pain in his head, officials said.</p> <p>The police said they determined that the bullet was fired from a distance. There was no initial indication that the officer had been targeted, and no suspect had yet been identified. Investigators will determine if the shot was a stray bullet, officials said.</p> <p>But Mr. Adams, who visited the officer and his family at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell Medical Center in Manhattan, said the shooting was reflective of a problem that needed an immediate fix.</p> <p>"This is a horrendous act that took place," Mr. Adams said. "We don't start bringing in the new year with bringing in violence. It's unacceptable."</p> <p>Keechant Sewell, the new police commissioner, said at the news conference that no officers who were outside the station house at the time heard shots fired and that there had not been 911 calls in the area for gunfire. The shooting was also not caught on video cameras at the police station, she said.</p> <p>When the officer, who Commissioner Sewell said is a seven-year veteran of the department, exited his vehicle, others noticed that he had blood coming from his head. He was taken to the hospital, where he underwent surgery and doctors determined that he had a fractured skull, Commissioner Sewell said.</p>

	<p>“We are lucky, fortunate and grateful,” she said. “This incident underscores that there are too many guns out there in the wrong hands.”</p> <p>The shooting on Saturday served as a stark example of what Mr. Adams has made a central part of his campaign platform as he enters office.</p> <p>Gun violence had reached record lows in New York in 2018 and 2019. But during the coronavirus pandemic, shootings jumped significantly — remaining far lower than the peaks of the 1980s and 1990s but inflicting a major toll on some neighborhoods, including the section of East Harlem where the officer was shot on Saturday.</p> <p>Gun violence experts said the trends had shown signs of improvement and had started to level off in recent months, but the numbers remained higher than prepandemic levels.</p> <p>The rest of Mr. Adams’s first day in office struck similar themes about fighting crime.</p> <p>Earlier in the day, he was at a subway station in Brooklyn when he called 911 after seeing a fight break out on a nearby street. A police car eventually arrived after the situation had calmed down, and officers did not intervene.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/01 Pierce Co. violent New Year’s weekend
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/violent-deadly-new-years-weekend-south-sound/NEYNJWYBAJC67A467BEWJFALIQ/
GIST	<p>PIERCE COUNTY, Wash. — Three men are dead and one man is fighting for his life in four separate shootings from Tacoma to Spanaway.</p> <p>The shootings happened between New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day.</p> <p>The injured man had ties to the place where he was shot. Residents there said he lived and worked part-time at the Rothem Inn.</p> <p>He was shot on the second-floor balcony, outside a room a couple had just checked into.</p> <p>It is a disturbing scene outside this motel on South Hosmer. Tacoma police detectives are investigating the second shooting in the South Sound early on New Year’s Day.</p> <p>“It’s unfortunate to start the New Year like this, you know,” said Jay, a resident.</p> <p>Just after 6 in the morning, 911 calls began coming from the Rothem Inn, where Jay lives.</p> <p>Jay said he heard several gunshots. Then he saw a man and a woman run to a vehicle.</p> <p>“It seemed like they couldn’t find their keys,” Jay said. “So, they ran back up the stairs. And that’s when the gentleman ran back down the stairs and just ran down the street. And the woman got in the car and sort of drove off.”</p> <p>He and others believe the couple was involved in the shooting.</p> <p>“Oh, most definitely,” he said, “most definitely.”</p> <p>An hour earlier, some three miles away in Parkland, a 40-year-old man was found dead.</p>

	<p>“The person was shot inside the vehicle,” said Sgt. Darren Moss Jr., Pierce County Sheriff’s spokesperson. “So, someone else inside the vehicle shot this person.”</p> <p>Just a day earlier, on New Year’s Eve, a man was shot and killed in nearby Spanaway. The same day, the body of a man was found in a car in Tacoma’s Stadium District. He, too, had been shot.</p> <p>“If this is the way the New Year is starting then that’s not going to be good,” said Sgt. Moss.</p> <p>By mid-Saturday afternoon, the people who live in this motel realized they knew the 31-year-old victim, which made the shooting even more upsetting.</p> <p>“He was just like a watchdog,” said Eric Johnson. “Yeah. He kept a lot of problems out of here, really, so, a little bit concerning you know and him gone. It might get worse. I hope not.”</p> <p>Detectives are asking anyone with information about these shootings to come forward, so they can solve these murders.</p> <p>Police said these shootings do not appear to be random.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/01 Seattle: 4 shootings New Year’s holiday
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/in-seattle-3-men-injured-in-3-separate-shootings-over-new-years-holiday/
GIST	<p>Three men and one individual whose gender was not provided were injured in four separate shootings on New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day, according to the Seattle Police Department.</p> <p>So far, one suspect has been arrested in a shooting where a man was wounded inside a nightclub at 1:35 a.m. Saturday in Pioneer Square.</p> <p>Multiple 911 calls were placed reporting that someone fired a gun inside a club located in the 100 block of South Washington Street, according to a report by the Police Department. Officers found a 35-year-old man outside the club with a gunshot wound to his shoulder. He was transported to Harborview Medical Center.</p> <p>Police declined to specify which club the shooting occurred at. Previous shootings occurred on the same block in late September, when a man was shot inside a club, and in July, when two people were killed and three others were injured.</p> <p>Witnesses at the club Saturday morning described the alleged shooter to Seattle police officers. A 22-year-old suspect was found in a nearby parking lot and booked into King County Jail on investigation of first-degree assault and felony harassment.</p> <p>Just 30 minutes before that shooting, a 23-year-old man entered Harborview with a gunshot wound to his leg. He told officers he had been shot while walking in the Chinatown-International District. No other details were available from police as of Saturday afternoon.</p> <p>Around 6:35 p.m. Friday, a 38-year-old man with a gunshot wound to the chest entered a business in the 1400 block of 23rd Avenue in the Central District. The victim said he had been shot several blocks away. He was transported to Harborview.</p> <p>Finally, at about 5:30 p.m. Saturday, police were called to the scene of a shooting in the 1400 block of Third Avenue, between Pike and Union streets. One person suffered a non-life-threatening injury after being grazed by a bullet, police said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/30 Homeless camp makeshift shooting range
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/police-man-encampment-arrested-after-setting-up-makeshift-shooting-range/GTFUZYXCRBAPJTYCBYM5UXXSM/
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Seattle police arrested a man in an encampment who officers say had set up a makeshift shooting range and was firing shots into a tree for target practice.</p> <p>Around 1:45 p.m. on Wednesday, officers were called to the 9100 block of Spear Place South in South Seattle for reports of gunfire.</p> <p>Officers arrived and found a man in an encampment in a wooded area, where he had set up a makeshift shooting range.</p> <p>The 44-year-old man told officers he'd been shooting at a tree, and officers found a tree with several bullet holes in its trunk.</p> <p>Police discovered the gun the man was using had been stolen in Marysville. The man is also a felon and is not allowed to have guns.</p> <p>He was booked into the King County Jail.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/31 Looting halts WFP operations North Darfur
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-africa-sudan-united-nations-david-beasley-d141c98f724c3080d7de6831d643a9c9
GIST	<p>CAIRO (AP) — The World Food Program has suspended its operations across Sudan's province of North Darfur following recent attacks on its warehouses, a decision expected to affect about 2 million local people.</p> <p>A statement released by the U.N. food agency Thursday said all three of its warehouses in the area were attacked and looted. More than 5,000 metric tons of food apparently were stolen, the group said.</p> <p>Earlier in the week, the WFP said an unidentified armed group had attacked one of its warehouses in North Darfur's provincial capital of el-Fasher. In response, local authorities imposed a curfew across the province.</p> <p>However, the attacks continued until early Thursday, said the statement. Hundreds of looters have also dismantled warehouse structures, WFP added.</p> <p>"This theft has robbed nearly two million people of the food and nutrition support they so desperately need," said WFP Executive Director David Beasley. "Not only is this a tremendous setback to our operations across the country, but it endangers our staff and jeopardizes our ability to meet the needs of the most vulnerable families."</p> <p>The agency said it cannot divert assistance from other parts of the East African country to the looted warehouses without compromising the needs of vulnerable Sudanese living outside the province.</p> <p>Sudan is one of the poorest counties in the world, with nearly 11 million people in need of food security and livelihood assistance in 2022, said the WFP.</p> <p>The agency urged Sudanese authorities to recover the looted stocks and guarantee the security and safety of the WFP operations in North Darfur.</p> <p>On Thursday, the country's state-run news agency reported that a number of suspects were arrested in el-Fasher after they were seen riding trucks and animal-drawn carts loaded with food stocks that were allegedly stolen from the WFP warehouses. SUNA news agency did not say how many were arrested.</p>

	<p>The WFP decision comes amid political upheaval that followed the October military coup.</p> <p>On Friday, a doctor's group said that five people were killed in anti-coup protests that erupted a day earlier in several provinces across the country. Security forces fired tear gas and live ammunition to disperse thousands of protesters, the group said. With Thursday's fatalities, the total death toll since the coup has risen to 53.</p> <p>Meanwhile, the Sudanese police acknowledged in a statement issued on Friday that four protesters were killed and more than 290 were wounded in the protests. The statement posted on SUNA made no mention of police using tear gas or live ammunition. The police added that more than 40 policemen were wounded in clashes with protesters.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/31 What's next for Ghislaine Maxwell?
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/ghislaine-maxwell-guilty-what-next-5082bd54ec442632c53319e6c43c2dd4
GIST	<p>NEW YORK (AP) — With Wednesday's guilty verdict in the sex-trafficking trial of Ghislaine Maxwell, here's a look at what the once high-flying Jeffrey Epstein confidante was accused of and what's next for her:</p> <p>WHO WERE GHISLAINE MAXWELL'S ACCUSERS? The prosecution hinged on the accusations of four women — Annie Farmer and the pseudonymous Jane, Kate and Carolyn — who say they were teenagers when Maxwell and Epstein sexually exploited them in the 1990s and early 2000s.</p> <p>ON WHAT CHARGES WAS GHISLAINE MAXWELL CONVICTED? The trial focused on six counts:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. conspiracy to entice minors to travel to engage in illegal sex acts 2. enticement of a minor to travel to engage in illegal sex acts 3. conspiracy to transport minors with intent to engage in criminal sexual activity 4. transportation of a minor with intent to engage in criminal sexual activity 5. sex trafficking conspiracy 6. sex trafficking of a minor <p>She was convicted on all charges except the second count, despite her lawyers' assertions she was just a patsy.</p> <p>WHY WAS SHE ACQUITTED ON ONE COUNT? Without public statements from the jurors, who have yet to come forward, it's impossible to say for sure. But the second count, enticement of a minor to travel to engage in illegal sex acts, was perhaps the most ambiguous of the charges levied. Maxwell was accused of having "enticed" Jane to New York City, arranging flights and offering gifts, knowing that Epstein would abuse her. During deliberations, the jury seemed to be hung up on this count, asking for the definition of "enticement" in a note.</p> <p>HOW EXACTLY DO YOU PRONOUNCE 'GHISLAINE'? Hard "g," silent "s." Think "ghee," like the clarified butter. If it helps, the cover of the New York Post — run by Rupert Murdoch, a rival of Maxwell's late media baron father — the day after the verdict: "GHILTY!"</p> <p>HOW MUCH PRISON TIME DOES GHISLAINE MAXWELL FACE? The most serious count on which the 60-year-old was convicted carries up to 40 years in prison. The count on which she acquitted was fairly minor, carrying a five-year maximum.</p> <p>SO WHAT'S NEXT FOR GHISLAINE MAXWELL?</p>

She needs to be sentenced, but a date has yet to be set. A family statement the night of the verdict said an appeal had already been started. And she faces another trial, on two counts of perjury that were spun off from her indictment.

WHY IS GHISLAINE MAXWELL CHARGED WITH PERJURY?

Those [counts are based on her answers during 2016 depositions](#) in a since-settled lawsuit brought by accuser Virginia Giuffre. She's accused of lying by saying "I don't know what you're talking about" in response to a question about whether Epstein had a "scheme to recruit underage girls for sexual massages." She's also accused of lying by saying she didn't recall whether there were sex toys or devices at Epstein's Florida home and by saying she wasn't aware Epstein was having sex with anyone but her. Her lawyers argued those depositions shouldn't be used at the criminal trial because of a court-approved agreement her answers would stay confidential.

WHAT WAS GHISLAINE MAXWELL UP TO BEFORE HER ARREST?

Maxwell was arrested in July 2020 — almost a year after Epstein killed himself in jail while awaiting trial. After Epstein's death, she withdrew from public activities like running an oceans charity. Her [whereabouts became a subject](#) of public speculation. Was that her eating a burger and reading a book on CIA operatives in Southern California? Was she living in Britain or Paris or maybe even Massachusetts? Prosecutors say she went into hiding in New Hampshire — where she was eventually arrested — in a million-dollar home [where she kept her cellphone wrapped in foil](#).

SO HAS GHISLAINE MAXWELL BEEN IN JAIL THIS WHOLE TIME?

Yes, despite multiple requests for bail, Maxwell was deemed a flight risk and has spent well over a year lodged in a federal lockup in Brooklyn. Her attorneys and family have lambasted jail conditions as punitive and inhospitable to Maxwell's ability to mount a proper defense. Her attorney asked immediately after the conviction was announced that Maxwell be given a COVID-19 booster shot because infection rates in her jail were rising dramatically. Once she's sentenced, she will be moved to a federal prison.

HOW LONG DID THE TRIAL TAKE?

A month. Testimony started Nov. 29; we had a verdict Dec. 29. The whole trial was initially projected to last six weeks, but the witness lists for both sides were dramatically truncated without explanation. The jury took five full days to decide the case.

WHY DIDN'T GHISLAINE MAXWELL TESTIFY?

She told the judge — not without some defiance — that she had no need to testify, as the prosecution had failed to adequately prove their case. The tactic didn't work out for her, but it's not an unusual one: High-profile defendants rarely put themselves on the stand, as it opens them up to a lot more scrutiny.

WHAT EXACTLY WAS GHISLAINE MAXWELL'S RELATIONSHIP WITH [JEFFREY EPSTEIN](#)?

They were romantically involved, but at some point — the timeline is unclear — she says she transitioned to being more of an employee, running his household (Epstein had homes all over the place: Palm Beach, Florida; New Mexico; Manhattan; a private island in the U.S. Virgin Islands; Paris). Prosecutors introduced records showing Epstein had paid Maxwell more than \$20 million through the years and accused her of functioning as Epstein's madam, procuring underage girls to satisfy him sexually.

HOW IS PRINCE ANDREW INVOLVED IN ALL OF THIS?

He's not. Not exactly, at least, but Maxwell's conviction [isn't good news for the embattled British royal](#). Giuffre is [suing Andrew, saying he sexually abused her when she was 17](#). She says Maxwell facilitated her meetings with Andrew, who has denied the account. These accusations were [left out of this trial, though](#) Andrew's name did come up in testimony: [a pilot of Epstein's private jet](#), dubbed the "Lolita Express" by the news media, testified he had flown Andrew and an [accuser confirmed she told the FBI](#) she had flown with the prince, as well.

WHO IS GHISLAINE MAXWELL'S HUSBAND?

A mystery man! She was living with him when she was arrested in New Hampshire, but court documents have not made his name public. He did support her bail attempts, but was never spotted at the trial. She had transferred most of her assets to him, but has also told officials they're in the process of divorcing.

IS ANYONE ON GHISLAINE MAXWELL'S SIDE?

Her family is sticking by her. Her sister Isabel attended each day of proceedings, often joined by other siblings, and her family [issued a strong statement of support](#) for their sister after the verdict. Ghislaine is notably the baby of the family and said to have been the favorite of her father, Robert Maxwell, who died falling off a yacht named for her.

HOW HAS GHISLAINE MAXWELL BEEN SPENDING HER TIME IN JAIL?

According to [a website set up by her family](#), Maxwell has been working through a pile of books. Her reading list runs the gamut of criminal-justice related books like the award-winning "Just Mercy" by [Bryan Stevenson](#) to "Licensed to Lie: Exposing Corruption in the Department Justice" by [Sidney Powell, a conspiracy theorist](#) and former lawyer for President Donald Trump. She's also been making her way through [Philip Pullman's](#) "His Dark Materials" fantasy series and [popular book club fiction pick](#) "Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine," by Gail Honeyman.

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HEADLINE	12/31 Antwerp as Europe's cocaine gateway
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/inside-europes-cocaine-gateway-a-repeat-of-miami-in-the-1980s-11640946603?mod=hp_lead_pos12
GIST	<p>ANTWERP, Belgium—For centuries, goods flowing through the giant port here have enriched this elegant city, known for its diamonds, art and fashion.</p> <p>Now a different import from across the Atlantic—cocaine—has unleashed a gusher of cash that officials say is swamping Antwerp with corruption, violence and economic distortion.</p> <p>Authorities have seized 88 metric tons of cocaine stashed in containers from Latin America this year, nearly 10 times the figure in 2014. It is far more than any other European port, as traffickers flood the continent with so much cocaine that it may now be a bigger market than the U.S., according to the Drug Enforcement Administration.</p> <p>The resulting injection of cash has warped the city's economy and strained society. Police, customs officers and a hospital worker have been arrested for feeding information to cocaine-trafficking networks via encrypted apps. Reputed traffickers rent supercars for hundreds of euros a day and recruit youths with the allure of quick cash and flashy lifestyles. Legitimate companies struggle to compete with criminals' front businesses that can tolerate large losses.</p> <p>"It's a drug economy," said Kevin Daniels, the DEA's deputy chief in Europe. "It's a repeat of Miami in the 1980s."</p> <p>Antwerp and nearby Rotterdam in the Netherlands, Europe's two largest ports, are now the main gateway for cocaine into the continent, according to a joint report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and Europol, the European Union's police agency. Officials seized less than 10 tons in Antwerp in 2014, the September report said.</p> <p>Gangs able to bring the cocaine ashore through their connections at the ports, many of Moroccan or Albanian heritage, have risen in power in recent years. The cocaine that police seized this year had a wholesale value in the low billions of euros, and likely many times more got through undetected, officials said.</p> <p>The inflow has triggered a spate of gang violence. Restaurants and homes have been hit by grenades and rifle fire. The message of such attacks can be a warning to rival gangs, pressure on a port official to aid a</p>

gang, or a sneaky method to undermine rivals by alerting police that the owners of a cafe may be linked to the drug trade.

The cash tsunami is distorting Antwerp's economy, officials say, jacking up prices for real estate and existing businesses.

"Bad money drives out good money," said Antwerp Mayor Bart De Wever. "They will chase out honest people."

Some companies are used to launder money, from restaurants to luxury car dealers. Far more widespread and pernicious are companies that undermine and disrupt the legal economy, said Yve Driesen, director of the Federal Judicial Police in Antwerp.

Drug traffickers buy restaurants or shops to give the impression that their fortunes derive from legal commerce. Front companies also use legal activities to hide their illegal drugs-related work. For example, a transport company that extracts cocaine from shipping containers could also carry out legal transport on behalf of multinationals.

"They will win contracts because their prices are lower than competitors," said Mr. Driesen. Other companies have popped up to service the criminals. Resellers of [encrypted phones](#) depend on drug gangs who are the only ones able to afford contracts that can cost thousands of dollars a year, officials say. Companies rent out luxury cars for the equivalent of \$1,000 a day and more.

"They can only exist and flourish thanks to the cash of local drugs criminals," said Mr. Driesen.

To sneak their drugs through the port, traffickers are paying port workers multiples of their monthly salaries to move containers for surreptitious unloading, bribing customs officers to help them evade inspections, and prosecutors and police, including senior officers, to avoid the law, officials say. "Every layer of society is infected," said Mr. De Wever, the mayor.

The effects are easy enough to miss if you're not paying attention, he said, especially for those living in the wealthier south of the city.

The money is pouring into poorer areas with large immigrant populations in the north of the city, where many of the criminals hail from. Criminal gangs give money to causes, such as youth soccer teams, to burnish their reputations, officials say.

Mobsters can then rely on teenagers to watch for license plates of cops or swarm police to hamper drug arrests. Drawn into the criminal environment, they can move up the food chain and earn thousands of euros by acting as couriers for small bags of cocaine for gang members riding in luxury cars and wearing expensive suits.

"That's not a positive role model," said Mr. Driesen.

Authorities are trying to fight back, pooling resources and information among police, prosecutors, customs and other services. Law enforcement and city hall are using various powers to close down eateries with links to money from cocaine. Associations of port companies and dock workers launched an awareness campaign and a hotline for anonymously reporting suspicious behavior.

Earlier this year, police infiltrated an encrypted messenger system, downloading around one billion messages that led to hundreds of arrests and spurred many further investigations, dealing a blow to the gangs here. But officials acknowledge they are fighting a relentless enemy.

"In a few months, there are other people who will take their place, but the experience helps us develop new strategies," said Franky De Keyzer, Antwerp's chief prosecutor. "It's always a bit of a cat-and-mouse game."

HEADLINE	12/31 Inside Rikers: mismanagement, dysfunction
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/31/nyregion/rikers-island-correction-officers.html
GIST	<p>The leaders of the New York City Department of Correction had already lost control over Rikers Island this fall when they went in search of one small measure of relief.</p> <p>They needed 19 correction officers whom they had posted at the Queens criminal courthouse to fill in at the massive jail complex, where staffing was short, slashings and stabbings were up and detainees had gained control over some housing units. It was Columbus Day, a holiday, and the workload at the Queens courthouse was comparatively light.</p> <p>But when the bus to Rikers arrived at the courthouse, many of the guards refused to board it. Instead, according to interviews, they claimed the onset of sudden illness. Seven of them dialed 911, complaining of chest pain, leg injuries, lightheadedness and palpitations. One produced a cane as proof of disability. More than a dozen officers left in ambulances. Rikers remained understaffed.</p> <p>The Columbus Day episode underscores how easy New York City's leaders have made it for jail guards to sidestep assignments they do not want, even as Rikers Island has been gripped by its worst crisis since it reeled from the crack epidemic in the early '90s.</p> <p>The powerful correction officers' union has said that hiring more guards would solve the problems. But records and interviews show that there is no staffing shortage in the jail system. In fact, on days this year when guard posts in volatile Rikers housing units went unfilled, hundreds of other correction officers were stationed elsewhere in less dangerous positions, including as secretaries, laundry room supervisors and even bakers.</p> <p>The groundwork for the violence and disorder on Rikers was laid over the years by successive mayoral administrations, which allowed power to shift to lower-level wardens and the guards' union and then to incarcerated gang members themselves. As a result, guards have been posted throughout the system in wasteful and capricious ways, generous benefits like sick leave have been abused and detainees have had the run of entire housing areas.</p> <p>A New York Times investigation — drawing on confidential memos and other internal city documents, hundreds of pages of public records and interviews with more than five dozen city officials, correction employees, detainees and their lawyers — has found official missteps going back decades.</p> <p>For years, mayors and correction commissioners have allowed jail managers to place the least experienced officers in charge of detainee dorms and cells, posts that are critical for keeping order but viewed by many as the least desirable assignments in the system. The managers, who base staffing decisions on seniority, department custom and office politics, have also filled the jobs with guards who have fallen out of favor with administrators, reinforcing the idea that they are punishment posts to be avoided.</p> <p>When those guards in the housing units have fallen ill, gotten injured or been barred from contact with incarcerated people for other reasons, other rules adopted by city leaders have made finding replacements unusually difficult.</p> <p>Every mayoral administration since John Lindsay's in the 1970s has signed union contracts granting unlimited sick leave to guards and the city's other uniformed workers. And records and interviews suggest that abusing it can carry few consequences: It can take more than a year for the department to bring discipline charges against an officer who is caught abusing sick leave.</p> <p>When they have been told that such policies could lead to dangerous breakdowns, city leaders have not acted on the warnings. As recently as February 2018, the office of Mayor Bill de Blasio's top criminal justice adviser presented the first deputy mayor, Dean Fuleihan, with a memo that stated that high rates of absenteeism among guards might be driving a rise in jail violence — and recommended steps to stabilize</p>

staffing and reduce violent incidents. The de Blasio administration took none of them, and the memo has not been made public.

And when conditions have spiraled out of control on Rikers in recent years, jail managers have favored quick fixes over deeper policy changes. Under scrutiny in 2014 amid reports of brutality by guards, the managers concentrated members of the Bloods gang in some units, the Crips in others, and still other gangs in other areas, hoping the practice would cut down on fights among rival groups. It did not work. Not only did incidents where guards used force rise, but some gangs were positioned to take over housing areas when the pandemic swept through and caused staffing problems.

The mismanagement over the years has left the people charged with running the jail system feeling powerless.

In an interview, the correction commissioner, Vincent N. Schiraldi, said the department is mired in profound problems and cannot easily be fixed. And he recounted an extraordinary admission he had made recently to other local officials: He could not ensure the safety of the people in his agency's custody.

"We are wasting money here," said Mr. Schiraldi, the jail system's second leader in the past four years. He will be replaced in January by Louis Molina, who was chosen by the new mayor, Eric Adams.

"We pay so many people to not do the job we want or need them to do. We pay them to stay home sick, we pay them to be bakers instead of correction officers or administrative assistants instead of correction officers," Mr. Schiraldi said. "We run a terribly, terribly inefficient system."

The failures are especially stark given the vast sums the city has spent on the Correction Department. At an annual cost to taxpayers of more than \$400,000 per inmate — more than six times the average in the nation's other biggest cities — New York has operated a jail complex that has broken down in fundamental ways, leaving some detainees to roam unsupervised and others to go without food or basic health care.

The fallout has occurred largely out of sight, on an island in the East River that most New Yorkers never visit or even think about.

It can be measured in loss of life — more than 16 men have died in the jail system this year — and in the thousands of injuries inflicted on other detainees, who, by September, had been slashed, stabbed, beaten or otherwise harmed at a pace of 38 per day for more than 270 days straight. Most of the detainees at Rikers have never committed violent acts in jail, and more than half suffer from mental illness or other serious ailments.

It can also be gauged by the rising number of assaults — more than 2,000 this year — endured by jail guards. Some officers responded by lashing out at incarcerated people. Others were accused of joining them in criminal acts. In May, seven officers were charged with taking bribes to smuggle drugs, scalpels and cellphones into the jails.

Still others have simply walked off the job. In interviews, current and former officers recounted the fear and exhaustion they felt while working consecutive shifts in hostile conditions, describing calls for backup that went unanswered and sudden fights that they were unable to control.

A spokesman for Mr. de Blasio's office defended the mayor's handling of Rikers, saying the administration took several steps during the pandemic to cut down on absenteeism and improve conditions for detainees.

"We have opened investigations, disciplined staff and implemented an executive order which instituted an aggressive 30-day suspension policy for sick abuse," said the spokesman, Mitch Schwartz. He added: "It takes patience, creativity and investment to fundamentally shift a broken system."

A spokesman for the correction officers' union did not respond to numerous requests for comment. Union leaders have denied that any policies they pushed for over the years were to blame for the chaos on Rikers Island today. They pointed instead to policy changes, such as limits on the use of solitary confinement, that they say strip guards of the tools they need to keep order.

"Officers are getting hurt and injured at a degree that they haven't gotten hurt and injured before," said Elias Husamudeen, who was president of the officers' union until June 2020. "No one wants to come back because they literally don't feel safe."

History of bad decisions

From the moment city leaders started building the complex 90 years ago, the history of the jail system has been rife with bad decisions.

City officials designed cells without adequate ventilation, chose not to install heating or cooling systems and failed to maintain sinks and showers, leading to a lawsuit over inhumane conditions there in the 1970s.

They allowed guards to employ violent tactics as the jail population swelled during the crack epidemic, spawning a culture of brutality. The incidents of excessive force continued in the 2010s, when a federal monitor was appointed to end the abusive treatment of teenage detainees.

Under Mr. de Blasio, who declined to be interviewed for this article, the city unveiled an ambitious plan to replace the complex with smaller neighborhood jails. But his administration also took steps that his critics say weakened oversight, pushing out aggressive watchdogs from the city Department of Investigation, the Board of Correction — a jail oversight panel — and the department's own internal monitor.

Addressing the problems on Rikers Island will be among the most pressing concerns facing Mr. Adams as he takes office as mayor this weekend. He has sent mixed messages about how he intends to go about it, saying he will pursue his predecessor's plan to close the jail complex while promising to enact other crime-fighting measures that would make doing so difficult. He has also courted leaders of the correction officers' union who have fiercely opposed the plan. "Rikers Island has been a national embarrassment, and we have ignored it," Mr. Adams said at a news conference this month. "We must have changes on Rikers Island."

Any changes will come too late for detainees like Brandon Rodriguez.

At 25, Mr. Rodriguez, who had struggled with bipolar disorder, was about to train for a new job at FedEx when he was accused of choking a woman in a domestic dispute on Staten Island.

He had not been on Rikers a week before his eye socket was broken by another detainee in a fight. When he refused to leave his cell the next day, guards in riot gear dragged him to a shower cell across the building and locked him inside.

The officer assigned to guard him was on his third consecutive eight-hour shift when Mr. Rodriguez took off his shirt, knotted one end around the showerhead and the other around his neck and hanged himself — the eighth inmate to die this year amid the turmoil in the jail complex.

His mother, Tamara Carter, said she learned the news through Facebook; nobody from the jail called her. Since then, she has thought about what she might say to city leaders if given the chance.

"I hope that one day me and the mayor can sit face to face, and I'd say, 'How can you let this happen?'" Ms. Carter said in an interview, her voice rising in anger. "Not just to my son, but all the deaths in 2021?"

Where the guards are

On paper, there is no reason the correction officer who was guarding Mr. Rodriguez should have been working 24 hours straight.

New York operates the best-staffed jail system in the nation, employing more guards per detainee than any other major American lockup. So many officers are on the city payroll that, on days in September when as many as 2,000 of them missed work — more than the total number of guards employed by the jails in Indianapolis and Jacksonville combined — there were still about 5,800 who reported for duty.

With so many correction officers on hand, it can be difficult to track what all of them are doing on a given day, according to Mr. Schiraldi and others. Even as the pandemic raged and concerns about staffing shortages spilled into public view, there was little transparency about who was posted where, and why.

But interviews and internal city records obtained by The Times reveal a system that uses uniformed officers in ways that other jail agencies do not.

Guards act as drivers for wardens. Guards answer phones and file papers for administrators. Guards supervise lawn-mowing crews. Guards oversee tailor shops. Guards help run a bakery.

An internal staffing report shows that of the more than 8,900 sworn officers on the department's payroll in February, about 850 were stationed at the department's Queens headquarters, at its training academy or in other positions requiring little or no contact with detainees.

Nearly 750 guards were assigned to daily posts at the Manhattan Detention Complex during a period in which the Lower Manhattan jail was holding, on average, just 16 people a day. (The mayor's spokesman, Mr. Schwartz, said the staffing report figures, which appeared in a memo on absence rates from the commanding officer of the Correction Department's Health Management Division, were not accurate; he said there were 370 guards posted at the Manhattan jail that month.)

Of the 5,400 officers assigned to the eight jailhouses on Rikers Island, 685 were posted at the Rose M. Singer Center, a minimum security facility that was housing about 235 women and transgender people.

Other staffing records obtained by The Times suggest that even when guards were assigned to some of the most volatile jailhouses on Rikers, many of them were working in jobs that had nothing to do with guarding detainees in housing areas.

On a day in late October when at least 16 officers at the George R. Vierno Center had to work back-to-back shifts on the floors of detainee housing units, the same jail had five guards working as warden secretaries, two guards in the mailroom and one guard each in the counsel room, storehouse and tool crib. There was no indication in the records that any of them were reassigned to relieve the officers guarding detainees.

Some correction officers prefer to work rotating shifts in the less desirable housing unit positions because of the opportunities for overtime pay. But more often, guards vie for less dangerous and more stable jobs in other parts of the jail system. And typically those assignments come down to seniority and whether they have relationships with the right people, according to interviews with five current and former correction officers and other officials.

As a result, the most challenging and dangerous jobs in the system often fall to the officers with the least experience.

Officials have complained about the policy for years but have not been able to change it, foiled by the department's layers of bureaucracy and a lack of backing from elected officials. The jails commissioner in 2010, Dora Schriro, argued at a City Council oversight hearing that year that staff should be redistributed with an eye toward having more experienced guards available to work with the most difficult populations of incarcerated people.

The staffing policies were singled out again in 2018 when Liz Glazer, then the leader of the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice, suggested similar changes. In memos to city leaders, Ms. Glazer also noted that about 20 percent of guards were not showing up for work and identified the unexpected absences as

possibly contributing to jail violence. She also suggested creating a “violence czar” to oversee a systemwide effort to curb violent incidents at Rikers.

But nothing had changed by the time the pandemic arrived. Soon new recruits, junior officers and those who were not politically connected were buckling under grueling shifts and forced overtime — which the jails commissioner, Mr. Schiraldi, linked to many of the deaths on Rikers this year.

Like other officials before him, Mr. Schiraldi lamented a system he said he could not change.

“I don’t think society really cares, and that reflects itself in who we hire, who we keep and who we support, how much time and energy elected officials put into this,” Mr. Schiraldi said. “The department can’t fix this by itself.”

The union’s clout

For any Correction Department leader who has weighed changes to staffing policies over the years, a powerful consideration has loomed in the background: How would the union respond?

The Correction Officers’ Benevolent Association has long been viewed as among the most formidable labor groups in New York, thanks in part to its former leader, Norman Seabrook, whose charisma, brash tactics and generosity with campaign donations molded the union into a political powerhouse.

It retained its clout even after Mr. Seabrook was imprisoned on federal corruption charges, and its current president, Benny Boscio Jr., criticized Mr. de Blasio for any suggestion that the union might have played a role in the Rikers Island crisis.

“They have been a force that has helped maintain the status quo,” said JoAnne Page, president of the Fortune Society, which aids the formerly incarcerated.

The union over the years has succeeded in limiting the city’s ability to replace guards with contractors or promote managers from outside union ranks. But few victories it has won have proven more consequential than the securing of the department’s sick leave policies. Under the group’s current contract, jail guards whose medical conditions are validated by a doctor and signed off on by the department’s health management office can call out sick for up to a year.

It is a benefit that correction officers and other members of the city’s uniformed services — police, fire and sanitation workers — have enjoyed at least since the 1970s, have celebrated over the years and have even used as a recruiting tool.

It has also been criticized for being easy to abuse. In 1992, an administrative judge hearing a case against four correction officers accused of excessively skipping work — one had missed 314 days over two and a half years — read the union contract and determined that the guards had been abiding by it. He added that the city should enact new rules if it wanted to punish other officers for similar behavior.

The policy was questioned again in 2004 by state auditors who found gaps in how the Correction Department was tracking officers who chronically called in sick.

And it was in the subtext when Mr. de Blasio’s administration sued the union in September, charging that it was engaging in an illegal job slowdown. (The city dropped the suit days later.)

Still, the policy has remained on the city’s books.

Sick leave has also been used as a bargaining chip, according to records and Mr. Schiraldi. In September, when the numbers of guards out sick had reached the highest points of the pandemic, the union delegate assigned to the Queens Criminal Courthouse sent a blunt offer in a letter to the commissioner’s office: Stop redeploying courthouse guards to Rikers, and she would ensure that all of them remained on the job — by delaying retirements for some and seeing to it that others returned from being out sick.

A month later, the Columbus Day revolt of some of the Queens courthouse guards took place. The incident remains under investigation.

Those officers who return to work from sick leave can still avoid being assigned to guard detainees, thanks to another policy embraced by union members. This one allows officers who are deemed by their doctors to be in need of light-duty assignments to remain in those posts indefinitely.

Concerned in 2016 that the policy was being abused, Angel Villalona, a top Correction Department administrator, urged then-Commissioner Joseph Ponte to curb it, even proposing a rule that would have limited the amount of time officers could spend in modified-duty posts. Mr. Ponte, who did not act on the proposal, said he did not recall receiving it.

During the pandemic, the number of guards who were out sick or on the so-called medically modified status lists ballooned into the thousands, in part, according to a person with knowledge of the situation, because the department's Health Management Division is so backed up with appointments that it can take months to verify that officers are suffering from ailments.

Surrendering control

Soon after Mr. de Blasio took office in 2014, he found his Correction Department engulfed in a different sort of crisis, unrelated to staffing problems. Accounts of shocking brutality by guards had led to a federal investigation and civil rights suit that accused city officials of condoning abusive behavior.

Under pressure to reduce violence by both guards and the incarcerated, correction managers approached the problem in a way that handed over power to gang members.

For years, the jail system had rotated incarcerated people in and out of housing areas on a regular basis, seeking to prevent detainees from banding together and outmatching correction officers.

But the policy also meant that rival gang members were often housed together, leading to stabbings, slashings and fights that guards would have to break up, often using force.

So the wardens began gradually concentrating members of the same gangs in certain housing areas, reasoning that the practice would make their numbers look better. Soon, some units became known as "Blood houses" and others as belonging to the Crips and other gangs, such as the predominantly Dominican Trinitarios.

"They started putting the gangs together to quiet them, and in essence gave the gangs control," said a former high-ranking jail official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media. "It had the side effect of creating powerhouse monopolies."

It also did not work. Reports of guards using force remained steady or rose over the years — as did slashings and stabbings by detainees.

But it did position gangs to take over in some areas when the pandemic began and staffing shortages occurred throughout the jails.

The mayor's spokesman, Mr. Schwartz, said the Correction Department "does its best to avoid concentrations of a single gang, though the detainee population itself is not always balanced by gang affiliation."

"We have to make housing decisions based on the population we have," he said.

This year, detainees in gang houses have managed the comings and goings of visitors to their units and even exercised veto power over who could be housed with them. They have controlled food distribution, meted out punishments for breaking rules and organized their own violent forms of entertainment.

Detainees in a unit that predominantly housed Trinitarios were running a fight club in the George R. Vierno Center this fall, with fighters squaring off in a cell as other incarcerated men cheered like spectators at a boxing match, according to security camera footage obtained by The Times, court records and an interview with a former detainee who said he participated in the fighting.

“I’m fighting to protect myself,” said the man, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of being injured or killed by the gang. “This guy has nothing against me, but we’re fighting to the death.”

The former detainee added that guards in the unit were aware of the fighting but did not intervene or report the injuries he said he sustained and witnessed during the fights.

In a news release issued weeks after the fight club audience was captured on video, Mr. de Blasio and Mr. Schiraldi hailed a decrease in the number of violent incidents reported at the jails, casting the numbers as a sign of improvement.

Recalling their time at Rikers, former detainees said they doubted the conditions they saw there could ever get better.

Paul Little was 46 when he landed at Rikers in July, accused of stealing packages from other people’s doors. He said he was in an intake center waiting for a Covid test when he heard the shouts of other detainees protesting a lack of food. Suddenly, one of their cells was on fire, and guards ushered Mr. Little and others to a chapel. He had not been among the protesters, but a correction captain knocked him to the ground, turned him on his stomach and then was joined by two other guards, he said. One of them stomped on his leg and broke it, Mr. Little said.

Kameron Wallace, 23, was jailed at Rikers for more than three years on charges of fatally shooting a Bronx teenager in 2017. He described what it was like to try to sleep in his housing unit after the pandemic began. “The inmates run the jails, and there are no officers,” Mr. Wallace said. “The cells won’t even lock at night, so you really had to sleep with one eye open.” He was acquitted in October.

Jailed on a parole violation after he was arrested on a charge of riding his bicycle on a sidewalk, Anthony Lopez remembers the fear he felt after he entered the complex in August — the bleeding face of the detainee he saw beaten by several attackers and the sound that another man’s head made as it was kicked by a gang member in the jail.

“I don’t see how they can get it back,” said Mr. Lopez, 49. “I think it is too far gone.”

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